THE UNIVERSITY OF LIFE

Employability and essential life skills at university

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THE SUTTON TRUST

About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.

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Foreword

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an untold impact on young people's education, with unprecedented disruption spanning two academic years. While schools and universities have done their best to conduct learning remotely, it has become increasingly clear that there is no substitute for face-to-face teaching. Much of the focus has been on the academic impact of this disruption, but the challenge faced by this generation is much wider than that. Learning from home, isolated from classmates, and with many activities cancelled, has also had a huge effect on the development of 'essential life skills' that are vital in preparing young people for their life and career.

Essential life skills are a key priority for the Sutton Trust, with our research demonstrating that teachers and employers value them the same, or even more, than academic skills. Communication, social skills, confidence, resilience and leadership are key attributes in the workplace. While the independent sector has often focused on developing these skills in their pupils, poorer students have often missed out on such support. If we want to improve social mobility, building these life skills in young people from all backgrounds should be a priority.

Developing life skills is not just a job for schools, but universities as well. Today's report explores the student experience and the impact this can have on developing essential life skills and employability. For many students, additional activities such as student societies and sport are as important in shaping their future as their academic courses. However, it is of real concern that low-income students are more likely to miss out on these formative experiences. Universities must do more to ensure all their students receive a well-rounded university education, including participating in extracurricular activities, sport, work placements and studying abroad.

"Every young person should have the opportunity to build their confidence, motivation and resilience in ways that will benefit them for life."

The research also finds that students living at home are much less likely to take part in the full scope of university life. As young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to live with their families, this has inevitable impacts on their university experience and their opportunity to develop life skills. The pandemic has only served to amplify this issue, with the number of less well-off students living with their families increasing significantly from 41% in 2019 to 64% in early 2021. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to need to work during term time and exam periods, again impacting their ability to make the most of the university experience.

In order to improve access to valuable enrichment experiences at university, I'm delighted that through our new partnership with JPMorgan Chase we will be able to offer support to hundreds of Sutton Trust alumni in the decade to come. This will enable them to take part in truly life-changing experiences which will build important skills such as communication, resilience, confidence, motivation and leadership; skills which our research has shown are highly valued by employers.

But if we want higher education to prepare all students for their career, regardless of background, we need to see wider action. Universities themselves should seek to make opportunities available to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but we also need to look again at the student finance system. Young people from the poorest backgrounds leave university with the most debt. We need to make sure that young people have enough financial support to cover the rising costs of university, without sacrificing their academic work and extra-curricular participation to do so.

Every young person should have the opportunity to build their confidence, motivation and resilience in ways that will benefit them for life.

I'd like to thank the team for this important research, and JPMorgan Chase for their generous support.

Sir Peter Lampl

Founder and Executive Chairman of the Sutton Trust, Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

Key Findings

Participation

- Students take part in a wide range of activities outside of their core academic work at university. For recent graduates, carrying out paid work at university was common (79%), as was participation in student societies (61%). Many had also taken part in work experience (43%), but only a small proportion (12%) studied abroad during their degrees.
- However, participation differs substantially by socio-economic background. Just over half (52%) of recent graduates from working class backgrounds took part in student societies, compared to almost two thirds (64%) of better-off students. There is a similar gap in participation for work experience placements (36% vs 46%) and study abroad (9% vs 13%).
- Paid work is equally common for students from all socio-economic backgrounds, but graduates from working class backgrounds were more likely to have worked alongside periods of study, including in their final year (43% vs 38% of middle class graduates), during term time (53% vs 47%) and during exam periods (34% vs 29%).
- Rates of participation in activities also differed for graduates from different groups of universities. While 75% of graduates from Russell Group universities took part in student societies, this figure was just under two thirds (64%) of those at Pre-1992s and fewer than half (46%) of those who went to a Post-1992 institution.

Development of essential life skills at university

- While many graduates felt their university course had helped them to develop life skills such as communication (62%) and resilience (53%), fewer than half (43%) felt it had developed their motivation, and less than a quarter (24%) felt it helped them to develop leadership skills.
- Many of the skills not developed well by a student's course were developed by other activities, although there was a great deal of variation between them. While 43% of those who took part in student societies felt it had developed their leadership skills, less than a third (29%) who did a work experience placement said the same. And while two thirds (66%) of students who took part in study abroad felt it improved their resilience, this was only about a quarter (23%) of those who took part in student societies. This variability in skills development across different activities shows the importance of students taking part in a wide range of pursuits during their degree.
- There were also differences by socio-economic background in how well graduates felt their skills had been developed. Graduates from less well-off backgrounds who had studied abroad were less likely to say that the experience had built their communication skills, confidence or resilience when compared to better-off graduates. Working class graduates were also less likely to say that student societies developed their leadership skills (35% vs 45% of those from better-off backgrounds). However, some reported other activities were more beneficial. While 65% of middle-class graduates said that a work experience placement had developed their confidence, 69% of graduates from working class backgrounds said the same.

Barriers to participation

- While taking part in activities outside of their academic course helped many students to develop essential life skills, many students do not access this wider set of activities. Those who did not take part were asked about the main barriers to their participation.
- The most common reason students did not take part in work experience was because their university or course did not give them an opportunity to do so (39%). This proportion was higher for graduates of Pre and Post 1992 institutions (41% at both, compared to 36% of Russell Group attendees).
- Just under a third (31%) of those who did not do work experience said no relevant placements were available, 18% cited cost as a barrier, while 16% said they were unable to do a placement due to other paid work commitments.
- Cost was often a barrier for working class graduates. 1 in 5 (20%) of working class graduates who did not take up a work experience placement during university could not afford to; for example because of a need to spend the time in better paid employment or due to the cost of commuting. This compared to 15% of better-off graduates.
- 34% of students reported they were living at home with their family while attending university, with consequent impacts on their experience of university life. Two thirds (66%) of those living away from home took part in extra-curricular activities, compared to 38% of those in their family home. Students from working class backgrounds were substantially more likely to be living at home during term.
- The most common reason cited by students who hadn't taken part in student societies was because none had interested them (43%), but a third (32%) who did not take part could not due to paid work commitments and just over a quarter (26%) did not feel confident speaking to other members of the society.
- Financial concerns were common barriers for working class students. 16% of graduates from such families who did not do a student society could not afford to take part, compared to a lower proportion (11%) of their middle-class peers. Just over one in three (35%) from working class backgrounds were unable to take part because they did not have time due to paid work, a slightly higher proportion than those from middle-class families (31%) .
- Very few students study abroad, and many who did not had no interest in doing so (28%). However, there are some barriers to participation. Roughly 1 in 3 (34%) who did not study abroad said that it was not offered as an option in their course or university, and over a quarter (27%) said they could not afford to. Graduates from poorer backgrounds were more likely to cite cost as a barrier (31% vs 25%).

How well do universities develop employability skills?

- Over a quarter of graduates (29%) did not feel that university had given them the skills they needed to get hired in the jobs they wanted after graduation. This figure was higher for students from working class backgrounds (33% vs 27% of middle class students), and students at Post-1992 (32%) and Pre-1992 (29%) institutions, compared to those who attended universities in the Russell Group (25%).

- Similarly, just under a quarter (24%) of graduates did not think their time at university gave them the skills needed to perform well in the sort of jobs they wanted. And again, this problem was more common for graduates from working class (29%) than middle class (22%) backgrounds, and for graduates from Post-1992 institutions (30%) compared to those at Pre-1992s (21%) or the Russell Group (19%).
- While most (73%) graduates felt their time at university helped them to develop social skills sufficiently, far fewer felt the same about their development of other skills, including networking (under half, at 45%), preparing job applications (45%) and job interviews (39%).
- Graduates from Pre-1992 institutions were the most positive that their university had sufficiently helped them to develop skills for preparing job applications (49%), compared to lower proportions in the Russell Group (45%) and Post-1992s (42), with a similar pattern for job interviews. Students from Pre-1992 institutions were however the least positive about how sufficiently their universities had developed their networking skills (40% saying fairly or very sufficient, compared to 46% at Russell Group Universities).
- While 52% of those from better-off backgrounds felt they had sufficiently developed skills in finding the right jobs and opportunities. However, a far lower proportion (44%) of their peers from poorer backgrounds said the same.

Recommendations

For universities and student unions

- **Universities should help students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to access paid internships and work experiences**, including through targeted provision of information and advice, along with financial support. They should encourage students from widening participation backgrounds to apply for such opportunities and look at providing additional support (e.g., bursaries or grants) to poorer students where needed, to enable them to take up these opportunities.
- **Universities should look at embedding opportunities to develop employability and life skills within students' courses.** Doing so can help to ensure all students have equal access to these types of opportunities, rather than reserved for those with more support and confidence to be pro-active. This can be done through a wide range of activities, such as sandwich years, service learning and employability modules.
- **Universities and student unions should explore and tackle barriers that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face in taking part in extra-curricular activities.** These include affordability, not having had the opportunity to take part in these activities previously, and a lack of knowledge on the benefits such activities can have for employability. Additional support could be put in place to help students overcome these barriers.
- **Universities and student unions, particularly at institutions where disadvantaged students are significantly under-represented, should actively work to create environments which respect and promote diversity, including by socio-economic background.** Strong action should be taken where these standards are not met, to ensure all students feel comfortable and can fully participate in their courses and extra-curricular activities.

For government

- **The government should use the Turing programme to transform the opportunities available for disadvantaged students to study abroad.** The programme should aim to level up participation in opportunities abroad for lower income students, by removing financial barriers, providing a wide range of options for students both in Europe and further afield, and by working in consultation with disadvantaged young people to identify barriers to their participation.
- **Maintenance grants should be restored, to provide additional support for those who need it most. But, whether through loans or grants, the government should also review the sufficiency of maintenance available** to ensure it can cover living costs for those whose parents cannot supplement this maintenance. Reducing the need for students from less well-off backgrounds to work during term time could positively impact both their academic and wider skills development, as well as enabling them to take full advantage of the university experience.

Introduction

Traditionally, universities have focused on developing a student's core academic abilities. But with more young people studying for degrees in an increasingly competitive job market, it is now becoming clear that a degree alone is not enough for young people to succeed in the world of work.

Even if two young people go to the same university and achieve the same degree classification, if one of them is from a higher socio-economic background, they will be more likely to gain a top job,[1] and also to earn a higher salary,[2] than their equally academically qualified peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The reasons for these socio-economic gaps in the workplace are not fully understood, with previous work by the Sutton Trust highlighting some of the barriers young people face, for example unpaid and unadvertised internships.[3] One issue which has had comparably less attention is access to activities to develop skills and experiences related to employability when at university, including the development of non-academic skills such as communication, resilience, confidence, motivation and leadership. These essential life skills are likely to be developed by a variety of activities both in and outside of lectures and seminars, including through activities such as work experience placements, paid work, study abroad opportunities, volunteering and student societies.

Previous research by the Trust on these non-academic skills has found that 94% of employers think they are as or more important than academic qualifications, but that 52% of employers do not think university graduates have the skills required for the workplace.[4] Recent research by Skills Builder has also found evidence of a wage premium for young people with these essential skills.[5] However, the Sutton Trust's work at school level has found that there are large gaps in provision by level of disadvantage, with pupils from less well-off backgrounds less likely to take up extra-curricular activities that can develop life skills than their more advantaged peers (46% compared to 66%). We know little about provision of activities to develop these skills in higher education (HE), and whether there are gaps in access by a student's socio-economic background.

This report looks at a range of activities offered at university, to examine how well they develop employability and essential life skills in students, as well as whether access to such opportunities differs by socio-economic background. By looking at the experiences of recent graduates and current students, this research examines where barriers to access exist, and how activities to develop life skills can be opened up to students from all backgrounds. This report also includes case studies of good practice, looking at universities which have put in place programmes or initiatives to help students develop these skills, and, in particular, to open them out to students from a range of backgrounds.

The research in this report was carried out before the coronavirus pandemic began in early 2020. Due to the restrictions currently in place at the time of writing, students' experiences at universities have been very different in the 2020/21 academic year, and opportunities for students to develop these life skills are likely to have been impacted substantially by the pandemic. Accompanying this report is a research brief exploring these issues, which looks at the impacts of the pandemic on students' participation in activities outside of their core academic work, and how this has impacted different groups of students.

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[1] S Friedman & D Laurison. (2019) The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged. Great Britain: Policy Press

[2] C. Crawford, L. Dearden, J. Micklewright & A. Vignoles. (2017) Family background and university success – differences in higher education access and outcomes in England. Oxford University Press.

[3] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2018) Pay as you go? Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/

[4] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2017) Life Lessons. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/life-lessons-workplace-skills/

[5] E. Kashefpakdel, T. Ravenscroft & C. Percy. (2021) Better prepared: Essential skills and employment. Skills Builder Partnership. Available at: https://www.skillsbuilder.org/blog/better-prepared-essential-skills-and-employment-outcomes-for-young-people?fbclid=IwAR15IAKvWWgLDSa_c_i_leBeeRS2LBs8AtAjqfIdWxH9SVYBcW5IhIiHjdU

Background

This first section looks at what is currently known in the literature on the activities available to students to help them to develop employability and essential life skills; from internships, to study abroad schemes, paid work and student societies. It also examines where there are known gaps in access to these activities by socio-economic background.

Work placements and internships

Internships and work placements are likely both to be an important way in which young people develop essential life skills (for example building confidence in a work environment) and to serve a pivotal role in employability, giving young graduates a vital first stepping-stone into the workplace.

Helping students to access these opportunities may be of particular benefit to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with previous Sutton Trust research finding that students from poorer backgrounds are less likely to take up internships than their middle-class peers. Completing an internship was also found in that work to be associated with higher salaries for both middle- and working-class graduates.[6] Similarly, other research has found that graduates who have completed any kind of work experience are more likely to say that they felt their job is appropriate for someone with their level of skills and qualifications.[7] Access to these placements appear to be an important part of ensuring equality of access to the job market post-graduation.

While young people from a range of backgrounds make use of their university or career service advertising internships, Sutton Trust research has also shown that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have found a placement through this route. This is likely due to a comparative lack of access to placements through more informal paths, for example through family members or friends, avenues by which better-off young people often secure placements.[8] The provision of university services advertising internships are likely to be of particular importance to students from lower-socio economic backgrounds.

This report will look further at the barriers that students face to take part in work experience placements and internships while at university, focused on the challenges faced by young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Extra-curricular activities at university

University clubs and societies cover a wide range of activities and are usually run through a university's student union. Activities can include sports, for example football, hockey or rowing; creative activities, for example arts or music societies such as a choir, big band or a theatre group; fundraising groups; political or campaigning societies; international or cultural societies; faith societies; a student newspaper or radio station; a debating society or professional development societies such as mooting or investment banking.

Student societies are usually planned and run entirely by students, so give young people the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills, including confidence, resilience, organisational skills and

[6] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2018) Pay as you go? Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/
[7] K Purcell et al (2012) Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes. Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU). Available at: https://hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Futuretrack_Stage_4_Final_report_6th_Nov_2012.pdf
[8] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2018) Pay as you go? Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/

leadership. And indeed, there is existing evidence that the workplace values skills developed through these extra-curricular activities.

A large-scale follow-up of thousands of students found that taking part in extra-curricular activities, and especially being an office holder or student representative (which often follows from taking part in student societies), are all associated with better outcomes for graduates. The study found that graduates who had taken part in extra-curricular activities while in HE were more likely to have a graduate job than other graduates, were more likely to be satisfied with their current job, feel their job was appropriate for someone with their skills and qualifications, and to feel positive about their long term career prospects.[9] Similarly, a smaller piece of research (looking at 119 recent graduates) found that students who took part in societies while at university were more likely to go on to gain a job at a large firm or to start their career as managers, especially if they took on a leadership position within the society.[10]

Looking at the views of employers, research in Scotland surveying a small group of Scottish employers (46), reported that 40% felt students who had taken part in extra-curricular activities had to some extent a better chance of employment, with a further 40% saying it significantly increased candidates' success.[11]

Taking part in societies may also impact on retention. Research has found that students who take part in societies or sports are considerably less likely to consider leaving their course,[12] although it is not clear to what extent this is *caused* by taking part in the society, or whether students who take part in societies are just more likely to also be the sort of students who complete their courses.

Research has however also found that if students take part in extra-curricular activities which they see as important, they were also more likely to feel a sense of connection to others, which may help to explain any differences in retention rates.[13] As students from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out of their degree,[14] the potential that society participation may improve retention rates is an important issue to explore further.

However, previous studies have found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to take part in student societies than those from more advantaged backgrounds. For example, research carried out for the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE), surveyed 1000 students from four higher education institutions, and found that middle class students were more likely to be engaged in

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[9] K Purcell et al (2012) Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes. Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU). Available at: https://hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Futuretrack_Stage_4_Final_report_6th_Nov_2012.pdf

[10] G Tchibozo (2008) Extra-Curricular Activity and the Transition from Higher Education to Work: A Survey of Graduates in the United Kingdom. Higher Education Quarterly, 61, 37 - 56. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229609258_Extra-Curricular_Activity_and_the_Transition_from_Higher_Education_to_Work_A_Survey_of_Graduates_in_the_United_Kingdom (NB: This work was based on a relatively small sample, of just 119 students).

[11] National Union of Students Scotland (2012) Co-curricular Activity and Graduate Employability: Scottish Employers' Perspectives. Available at: https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/co-curricular-activity-and-graduate-employability

[12] J Neves (2019) UK engagement survey 2019. Advance HE. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf

[13] L Thompson, G Clarke, M Walker & D Whyatt (2013). 'It's just like an extra string to your bow': Exploring higher education students' perceptions and experiences of extracurricular activity and employability. Active Learning in Higher Education, 14, 135-147. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gordon_Clark2/publication/258124492_%27It%27s_just_like_an_extra_string_to_your_bow%27_Exploring_higher_education_students%27_perceptions_and_experiences_of_extracurricular_activity_and_employability/links/57ab538d08ae42ba52aed44b/Its-just-like-an-extra-string-to-your-bow-Exploring-higher-education-students-perceptions-and-experiences-of-extracurricular-activity-and-employability.pdf?origin=publication_detail

[14] C. Crawford, L. Dearden, J. Micklewright & A. Vignoles. (2017) Family background and university success – differences in higher education access and outcomes in England. Oxford University Press.

student societies than those from working class backgrounds. Working class students were instead more likely to spend time in paid work, and to say that time spent on student societies negatively impact on their university performance.[15] Similarly, one of the studies mentioned previously, which carried out a long term follow up of thousands of students, also found differences in uptake of extra-curricular activities by socio-economic background. While 80% of graduates from a higher managerial or professional background reported having taken part in some sort of extracurricular activity while at university, just 67% of those from a routine or manual background had done so. Similar differences in participation were also found between students whose parents did and did not have a degree.[16]

Existing research also gives us clues as to why disadvantaged students are less likely to take part in extra-curricular activities. One project looked at the views of 80 students at the University of the West of England and the University of Bristol, with participants equally split between working- and middle-class backgrounds. The work found that students from working-class backgrounds in the study cited several reasons for not taking part in extra-curricular activities, including not having the time to do so, and feeling socially excluded from the activities because they saw themselves as different from the type of people running them, for example due to their accents or their use of vocabulary. Working class students spoke about activities such as playing video games or clubbing as ways to make friends, rather than taking part in extra-curricular activities. In contrast, middle class students spoke about the importance of extra-curriculars to their future employability.[17] Similarly, a small survey of students at a large former polytechnic also found that those who were not the first generation of their family at university were more likely to recognise the value of extra-curricular activities, and to ensure their participation was accredited, compared to students who are the first generation in their family to attend.[18]

Previous Sutton Trust research has highlighted the challenges for students living at home in accessing extra-curricular activities, which often involve staying late after the teaching day has finished, which can be difficult for students who have a long journey home from campus. The same research found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are over three times more likely to stay living at home and to commute to university (45%), compared to their better-off counterparts (13%), and that state school students are also more likely (2.6 times) to stay at home and study locally compared to the privately educated.[19]

Even before the pandemic, for all students, there has also been a decline in participation in student societies and sports over the last few years, accompanied by a rise in time spent on paid work and caring responsibilities.[20]

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[15] C Lido et al (2008) What do students do outside the HE classroom? Extra curricular activities and different student groups . Advance HE. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/what-do-students-do-outside-he-classroom-extra-curricular-activities-and-different

[16] K Purcell et al (2012) Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes. Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU). Available at: https://hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Futuretrack_Stage_4_Final_report_6th_Nov_2012.pdf

[17] AM Bathmaker, N Ingram & R Waller (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34:5-6, 723-743. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ann_Marie_Bathmaker/publication/271932567_Higher_education_social_class_and_the_mobilisation_of_capitals_Recognising_and_playing_the_game/links/571481f808aeff315ba3602b/Higher-education-social-class-and-the-mobilisation-of-capitals-Recognising-and-playing-the-game.pdf?origin=publication_detail

[18] J Stevenson & S Clegg (2012) Who cares? Gender dynamics in the valuing of extra-curricular activities in higher education. Gender and Education, 24:1, 41-55. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09540253.2011.565039

[19] M Donnelly & S Gamsu (2018) Home & Away. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/home-and-away-student-mobility/

[20] J Neves (2019) UK engagement survey 2019. Advance HE. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf

This research will look in more detail at barriers to participation in extra-curricular activities, and explore where interventions could help to improve participation for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Paid employment

The report will also look at students carrying out paid work while at university, carried out primarily for the financial benefit rather than for experience related to a student's course or future career prospects. Evidence as to whether this type of paid employment is beneficial for students is mixed. Such work has the potential to improve both life skills and employability, for example with employees often needing resilience to adapt to challenges in the workplace and communication skills to speak to colleagues or customers. However, there is also the risk that paid work may make it harder for students to take part in other activities alongside it or spend as much time on their university work, limiting their potential to build life and employability skills through other routes.

And there is indeed evidence that taking on paid work while at university has a detrimental impact on a student's academic outcomes. A project looking at 1,000 students across six UK universities (including a mix of both old and new institutions) looked at the impact of working on students' degree results. After controlling for a range of factors, including a student's academic attainment on entry and the number of hours they worked, the work found that working during term time had a damaging impact on a student's final year marks and final degree classification; with students working the average number of hours a week of those in the study being a third less likely to get a good degree than an identical student who was not working. The study also found that the more hours worked, the greater the negative effect.[21] Other studies have also found similar detrimental impacts of working on degree outcomes.[22]

But there is also evidence that paid employment can improve graduate earnings, although limited to a high intensity of employment. A study looking at the employment outcomes of over 1,000 students from a research intensive university in the UK found that graduates who had carried out a very high intensity of employment during term time were more likely to secure a graduate level job and to have a higher salary, but that there was no impact to a lower level of employment. The authors speculate this return may be due to the skills students have acquired only being possible to develop through a large amount of work, or that knowing students were able to balance studying and such a high intensity of work may send positive signals to employers about their work ethic and time management skills. The study also found that most students will reduce the amount of time they work in their final year, but that those who were working for financial necessity (which students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were found to be more likely to do) would often be unable to do so, which would then have a detrimental impact on their degree outcomes, given final year marks often have the heaviest weighting in final degree classifications.[23]

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[21] C Callender (2008) The impact of term-time employment on higher education students' academic attainment and achievement. Journal of Education Policy, 23:4, 359-377. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680930801924490

[22] R J Jones & P J Sloane (2006) Students and term-time employment. Welsh Economy Labour Market Evaluation and Research Centre (WELMERC) . Available at: https://www.swansea.ac.uk/welmerc/pdf/STUDENTS%20AND%20TERM%20TIME%20EMPLOYMENT%20Feb%202006[1].pdf and S Jewell (2014) The Impact of Working While Studying on Educational and Labour Market Outcomes. Bus Eco J, 5:3. Available at: https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/business-and-economics-journal-2151-6219.1000110.pdf

[23] S Jewell (2014) The Impact of Working While Studying on Educational and Labour Market Outcomes. Bus Eco J, 5:3. Available at: https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/business-and-economics-journal-2151-6219.1000110.pdf

Previous research has also looked at the extent that paid work helps students to develop skills valued in the workplace (looking at a total of 12 skills, including communication, critical thinking, independent learning, innovation, understanding others and solving real world problems), and found working for pay had the least impact on self-reported skill development of any of the activities they examined, with the authors commenting that students who are required to work out of economic necessity are often employed in jobs which don't link to their future careers, and which are usually relatively low skilled. In comparison, the same study found that sports and societies had the highest impact on skill development on average, with volunteering and caring for others also performing better on skill development than working for pay.[24]

This report will look at students working while studying, with breakdowns by socio-economic background, including whether students are working during term time, their final year or during exams. It will also look at why they are working, for example, whether it is to cover basic living costs or additional spending.

Studying abroad

Many universities and courses give their students the opportunity to spend a year or a semester of their degree studying outside of the UK. While a large proportion of those who do so are studying a language, the opportunity is also often open to students on many other courses, from medicine or philosophy, though to history or biology. As well as the chance to develop language skills, students also have the potential to develop several life skills, including resilience through coping with new and potentially challenging circumstances away from home, and communication skills, getting across meaning in a new culture and sometimes also new language.

Research has found that studying abroad has several potential benefits, with students who have studied abroad more likely to obtain a first- or 2.1-degree classification (91.6%) compared to students who did not do so (80%). Students who have studied abroad were also less likely to be unemployed (3.1% vs 4.2%) and had higher average earnings six months after graduating (£23,482 vs £22,256). Importantly, these differences also hold when controlling for other factors related to attainment. For example, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (measured by socio-economic classification, SEC)[25] who have studied abroad are less likely to be unemployed than other disadvantaged students (3.7% vs 4.5%), and have slightly higher starting salaries on average (£22,938 vs £21,902),[26] and students who are the first in their family to go to university who study or work abroad are 13% more likely to go on to further study than their peers.[27]

However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to take part in study abroad, with research finding that just 5.6% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds study abroad, compared to 9.5% of students from more advantaged backgrounds. Students from poorer backgrounds

[24] J Neves (2019) UK engagement survey 2019. Advance HE. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf
[25] HESA (2017) Fields required from institutions in All fields
Socio-economic classification. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c16051/a/sec
[26] Universities UK International (2019) Gone international: Rising aspirations. Report on the 2016-17 graduating cohort. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/Gone-Intl-2019.pdf?
[27] Universities UK International (ND) Go International: Stand Out, one year on. UPP Foundation and Universities UK international. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/go-international/stand-out/Documents/GoIntl%201%20year%20on.pdf

who did study abroad were also more likely to take up short term placements less than 4 weeks in length (24% vs 20% of better-off students).[28]

Research commissioned by the UK Higher Education International Unit and the British Council in 2015 looked at students' perceptions of studying abroad, including breakdowns by socio-economic background of the barriers to studying abroad. The work found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds needed more help with several parts of the process, including convincing their parents the experience would be worthwhile and choosing the host institution. Students from less advantaged backgrounds are also more likely to be concerned about funding their placements.[29]

Provision of employability activities by universities

In addition to some of the activities already discussed here, such as helping with access to internships and the provision of study abroad, there are a range of other activities run by universities to help with both employability and skills development.

These can be provided in a variety of different ways, for example, opportunities to develop skills are sometimes built into student's courses. As previously mentioned, there is evidence that volunteering can have a positive impact on skills development for students,[30] and some universities are now looking at facilitating volunteering opportunities, for example by embedding them into a student's course through service learning. Service learning is a process by which students take part in activities to help in the community, with structured opportunities to reflect on the experience to help students to learn from the experience. Evidence from the US has found that service learning can help students to develop leadership skills, as well as skills in writing and critical thinking.[31]

Some universities also provide structured employability activities, which students are incentivised to take part in through accreditation on their degree certificate, or some other form of formal recognition. This type of scheme has the potential to help students who may not otherwise be aware of or fully able to articulate how their experiences have aided their employability, which is often the case for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, universities should be careful to ensure a full range of students are taking part in these programmes, and if necessary, actively encourage students from under-represented groups to take part. Other universities have a similar type of provision integrated into their degrees. The benefit of this approach is that all students can then access the provision, rather than needing students to opt into the programme.

Looking at the role of university career services, a 2017 report took a detailed look at the role of these services in promoting social mobility, and found that while there is some evidence that good careers guidance can improve retention, attainment and progression to employment rates for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, there is minimal evidence on what works best, and wide variation

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[28] Universities UK International (2019) Gone international: Rising aspirations. Report on the 2016-17 graduating cohort. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/Gone-Intl-2019.pdf?

[29] Universities UK International and British Council (2015). Student Perspectives on going international. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/iu_bc_outwd_mblty_student_perception_sept_15.pdf

[30] J Neves (2019) UK engagement survey 2019. Advance HE. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf

[31] AW Astin et al (2000) How service learning affects students. Higher Education paper 144. Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://en.wikipedia.org/&httpsredir=1&article=1145&context=slcehighered

in institutional investment across the sector.[32] Concerns have also been raised that disadvantaged students are less likely to make use of career services than their more advantaged peers.[33]

This report will look at how well graduates felt their university helped to prepare them for the world of work, and where they would have preferred to have had greater support. It will also look at existing provision of employability and career support in universities. Throughout, the report will include further case studies of good practice in existing provision in universities, especially where interventions are aimed primarily at students from widening participation backgrounds.

[32] The Bridge Group (2018) Social Mobility and University Careers Services. UPP Foundation and The Bridge Group. Available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/1714-Social-Mobility-and-University-Careers-Services-report-Digital.pdf-.pdf

[33] R Long et al (2020) Careers guidance in schools, colleges and universities. House of Commons Library, briefing paper 07236. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7236/CBP-7236.pdf

Methodology

To learn more about the access university students have to activities to develop life skills, this study used two main data sources:

- YouGov polling of recent graduates (classified at those ages 21-25 with a degree or higher).
- Youthsight polling of current undergraduate students.

This report primarily focuses on data from recent graduates, as this group will have completed their entire time at university, their answers will reflect their experiences across their whole degree, whereas polling of current students (even final year students) will miss some of their time at university. Additionally, most recent graduates will also have some experience of the workplace, so are likely to have a better understanding of whether the skills they developed at university are the ones they have needed for the world of work. And finally, as they will have attended university relatively recently, they are still likely to have a good level of recall for their experiences there.

However, while they are likely to have reasonably good recall of this time, recent graduates may forget some of the details of their time in higher education, and some things may have changed since they attend higher education a few years ago. Therefore, to complement the graduate polling, and in places add additional detail, this report also looks at the experiences of current university students, and where results from this group differed to recent graduates, findings have been included throughout.

To allow breakdowns by socio-economic background, both recent graduates and current students were asked for details on the occupation of the main earner in their household when they were age 16. This was used to determine a social grade, a classification based on occupation, developed for the National Readership Survey. The measure is one of the most common ways to determine socio-economic status based on occupation. The ABC1 group represents 'middle' class (here also referred to as higher socio-economic class, or as individuals from better-off backgrounds), and C2DE 'working' class (also referred to here as those from lower socio-economic or poorer backgrounds). It should be noted that these are two broad groups and thus likely underestimate the diversity of experience within these groups.

Both groups were also asked about the type of university they attended, which have been categorised into four groups, Russell Group, Pre-1992, Post-1992, and specialist institutions. The Russell Group is a self-selecting group of highly selective, research intensive universities.[34] Many, but not all, high entry tariff universities in the UK are in this group. Specialist institutions are those which focus on a specific area or singular subject, for example the Royal Veterinary College.[35] Most other universities are then divided into two further groups, those given university status before and those that received it after 1992, when former polytechnics and central institutions were given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.[36]

Recent graduates

Recent graduates were polled between 23rd December 2019 and the 20th January 2020, with 2,007 adults between the ages of 21-25 surveyed by YouGov. All had attended university and completed a degree within the UK.

[34] For more information on the Russell Group see: https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/
[35] Due to the small number of students attending specialist institutions, they have not been included in analysis here.
[36] Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents

Social grade was available for all 2,007 individuals surveyed. Most of the recent graduates sampled were from better-off backgrounds (ABC1, 72%), while just under a third (C2DE, 28%) were from working class backgrounds.

University type attended was available for 1,961 of the recent graduates surveyed. Of those, 39% attended a Russell Group university (compared to 25% of current undergraduates attending these institutions),[37] just under a quarter (24%) attended a Pre-1992 institution, and 35% attended a Post-1992 university. A very small proportion (2%) attended a specialist institute outside of these three main groups. Due to the low numbers of those attending this type of institution, breakdowns for this type of university have not been included here.

Information on recent graduates' current work status was available for the entire sample. The majority (86%) were currently working either full (72%) or part time (14%).

Current students

Current students were polled between 17th -22nd January 2020, with 815 current undergraduate students from the UK studying at UK universities surveyed online through Youthsight's Student Omnibus. The omnibus is weighted to be representative by Gender, Course Year and University Group (Russell Group, Post 1992 and Pre 1992 institutions).

Social grade was not available for 111 students, who selected other or prefer not to say. For the 704 students for whom this information was available, 54% were from middle class backgrounds (ABC1), while 32% were from working class backgrounds (C2DE).

University type was available for the full sample, with 27% of current students polled attending Russell Group universities, 23% at Pre-1992s, 48% at Post-1992s and 1% at specialist institutions. Due to the low numbers of those attending this type of institution, breakdowns for this type of university have not been included here.

[37] Based on data from HESA there were 1.8 million undergraduate students in the UK in 2018/19. According to Russell Group figures, 446,450 undergraduates were attending their institutions during the same period. See https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/Pages/higher-education-data.aspx and https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities

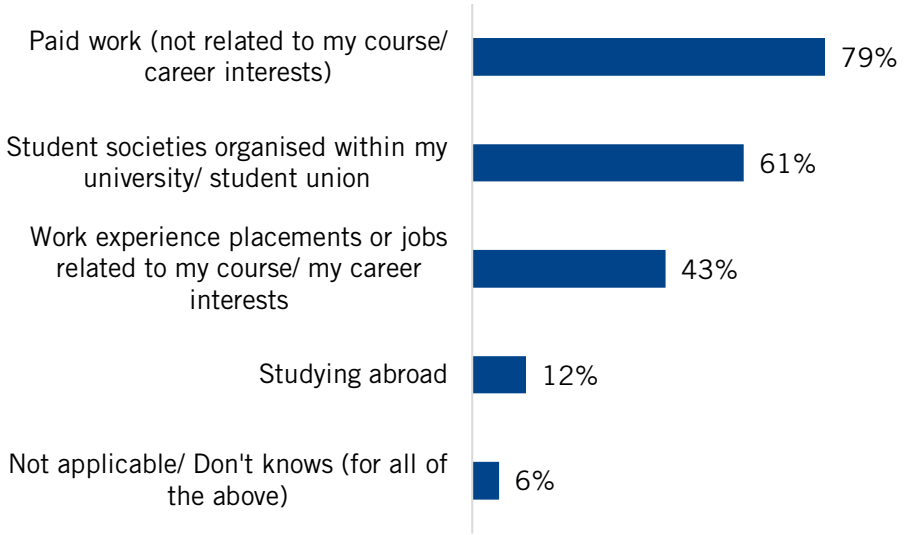
Activities at university

Patterns of participation

The following section looks at which activities graduates took part in while at university (and what students report doing currently), examining any gaps in participation between those from different socio-economic backgrounds, studying at different types of institutions, and those living with their families compared to those living away from home.

The most common activity graduates reported taking part in during their time at university was paid work (not related to their course or career interests), with most (79%) having done some form either during term time or their university holidays (See Figure 1). The second most common activity was student societies, with a sizable proportion of (61%) having taken part. In contrast, less than half (43%) of graduates had done work experience (either paid or unpaid) related to either their course or their future career interests, and only a very small proportion (12%) had studied abroad.

Figure 1: Activities young graduates took part in at university



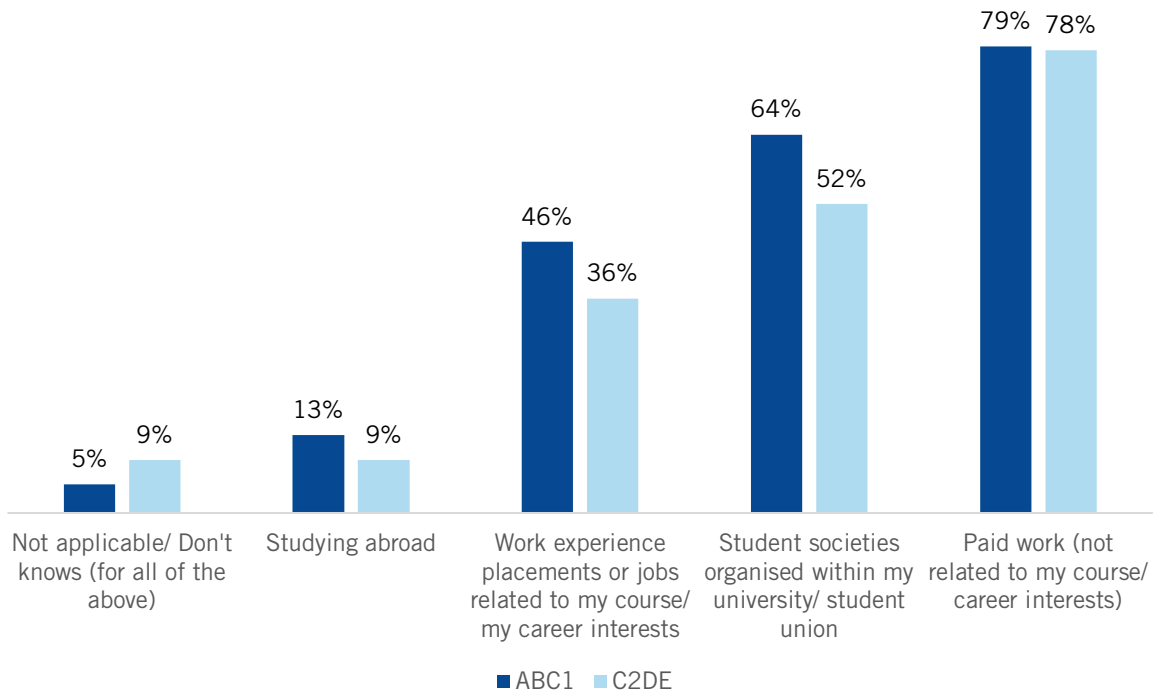
The proportion of current students reporting they had undertaken the same activities largely followed a similar pattern, but with reported participation unsurprisingly lower (given that, for example, a current first year may not study abroad until later in their degree, or may carry out work experience later on). However, current students were much less likely to report taking part in paid work while at university (41% compared to 79% of graduates). The reasons for this difference are unclear, with ONS data on part-time work by students not showing substantial change in the years pre-pandemic.[38]

There were differences in participation across several of these activities by the socio-economic background of graduates (see Figure 2). Graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds (C2DE) were less likely to take part in student societies (12 percentage points less), to have carried out a work experience placement (10 percentage points less) or to have studied abroad (4 percentage points less).

[38] Office for National Statistics. LFS: Part-time workers: Student or at school. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/ycdj/lms

Perhaps surprisingly, graduates from all backgrounds were equally likely to undertake paid work not related to their course or career interests.

Figure 2: Activities young graduates took part in at university by socio-economic background



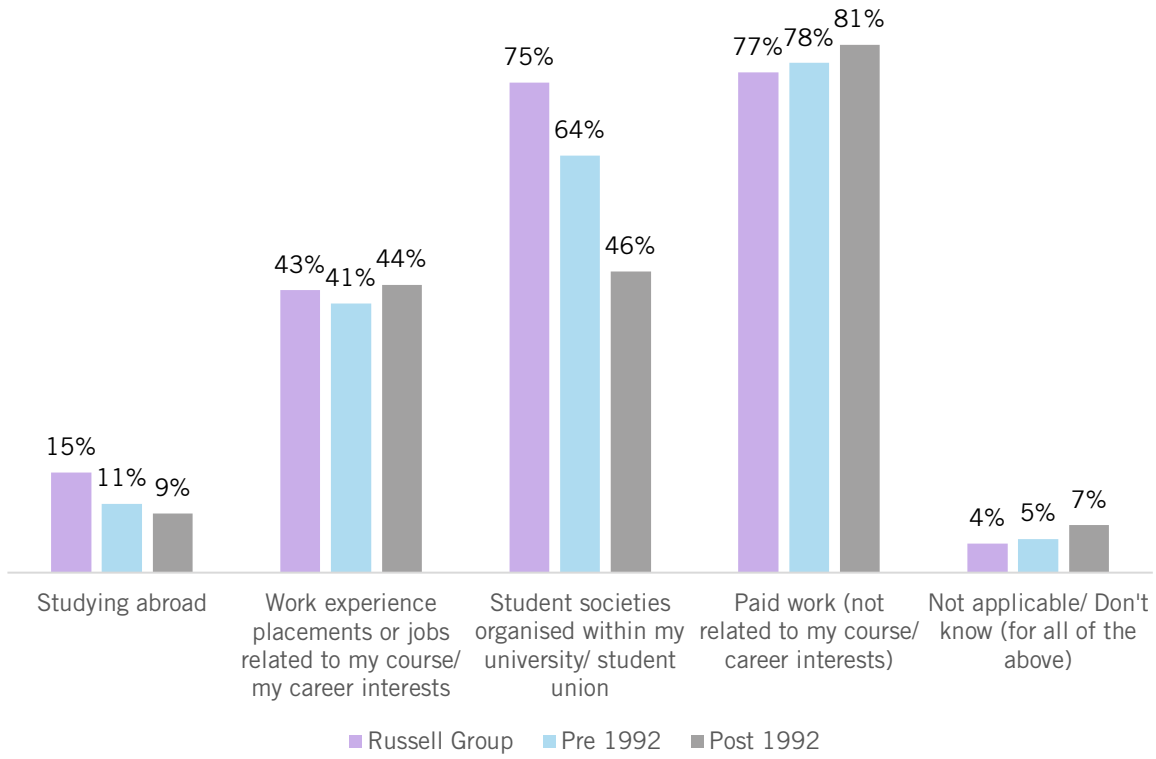
For current students, there was a very similar difference in participation rates in student societies (with those from poorer backgrounds 16 percentage points less likely to take part) and there were similarly no differences in their likelihood to undertake paid work (37% for ABC1 vs 36% for C2DE). However, unlike graduates, no differences were seen by socio-economic background for current students' participation in study abroad or work experience. As discussed above, when asking current students this may not fully reflect participation, as some students may only take part in an activity later on in the course of their degree, so it may be that gaps in these activities only open up following a higher overall amount of participation throughout the course of a student's time at university.

There were also differences in activity participation by the type of university a graduate attended (Figure 3). Those who attended the Russell Group were much more likely to have taken part in student societies: three quarters of graduates from these institutions did so, compared to only 64% of graduates from Pre 1992 universities, and just 46% of those from Post 1992 institutions. Similarly, while 15% of graduates of RG universities studied abroad, this was 11% for those who attended Pre 1992 universities, and just 9% of those from Post 1992s. Graduates who attended Russell Group institutions were slightly less likely to work compared to those from Post 1992 universities (77% vs 81%).

The same clear difference in participation in student societies was also seen for students currently at university (76% having participated at RGs compared to 64% at Pre-1992s and just 41% at Post-1992s). Current students at Russell Group Universities were also similarly more likely to have taken part in study abroad (6% vs 4% in post Pre and Post 1992s) as was reported by graduates. However,

current RG students were more likely to report undertaking paid work (44%) than those at Post 1992s (36%).

Figure 3: Activities young graduates had taken part in at university, by university type

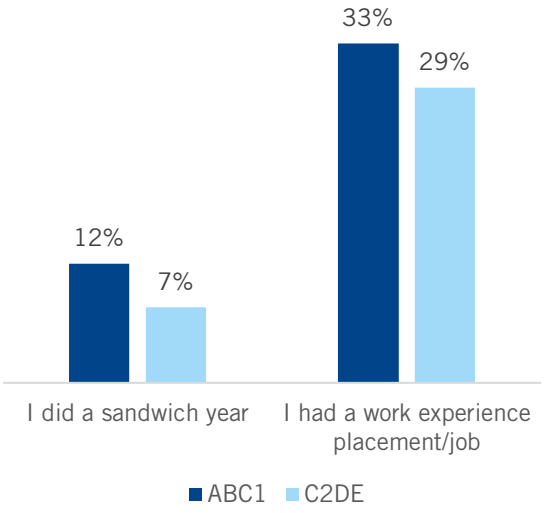


Looking at breakdowns for student societies by both the institution attended, and the socio-economic background of graduates, there are also some differences. Across all types of institution, students from better-off backgrounds are more likely to take part in student societies, but while the gap in participation is 10 percentage points for graduates of RG institutions, it is slightly lower (8 percentage points) for those at Pre-1992s, and much lower (3 percentage points) for those at Post-1992 institutions. A similar pattern was also found for current students. For both graduates and students, no differences were seen for paid work, and it was not possible to do these breakdowns for any other activities due to small numbers of graduates in each subgroup.

Work experience

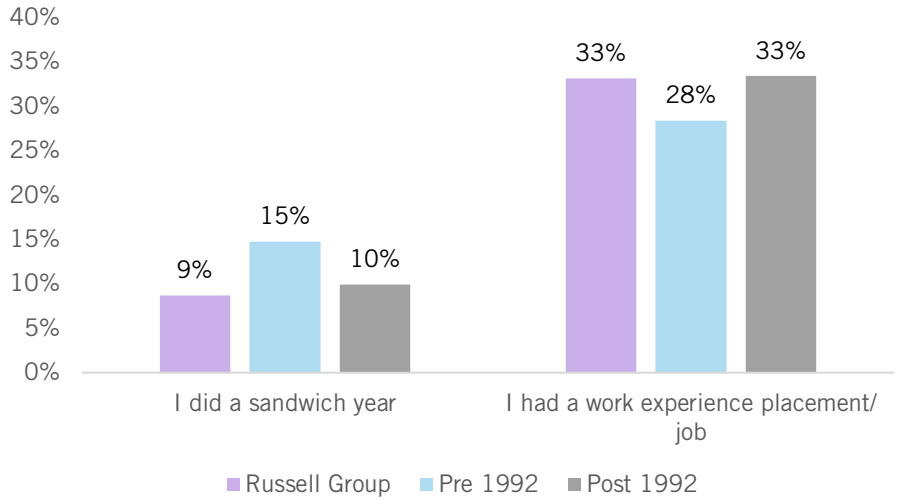
Looking in more detail at the types of work experience students carry out when at university, graduates were asked whether they had done a sandwich year (a full year out of their degree as a part of their course, organised through their university), or a general work experience placement. Of all graduates, just under 10% had carried out a sandwich year. Graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds were much more likely to have carried out a sandwich year during their course than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (12% vs 7%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Types of work experience by socio-economic background



The types of work experience graduates had taken part in also differed depending on the type of institution they had attended (see Figure 5). Graduates from Pre-1992 institutions were more likely to have taken a sandwich year (15% vs 10% at Post 1992s and 9% at RG universities).

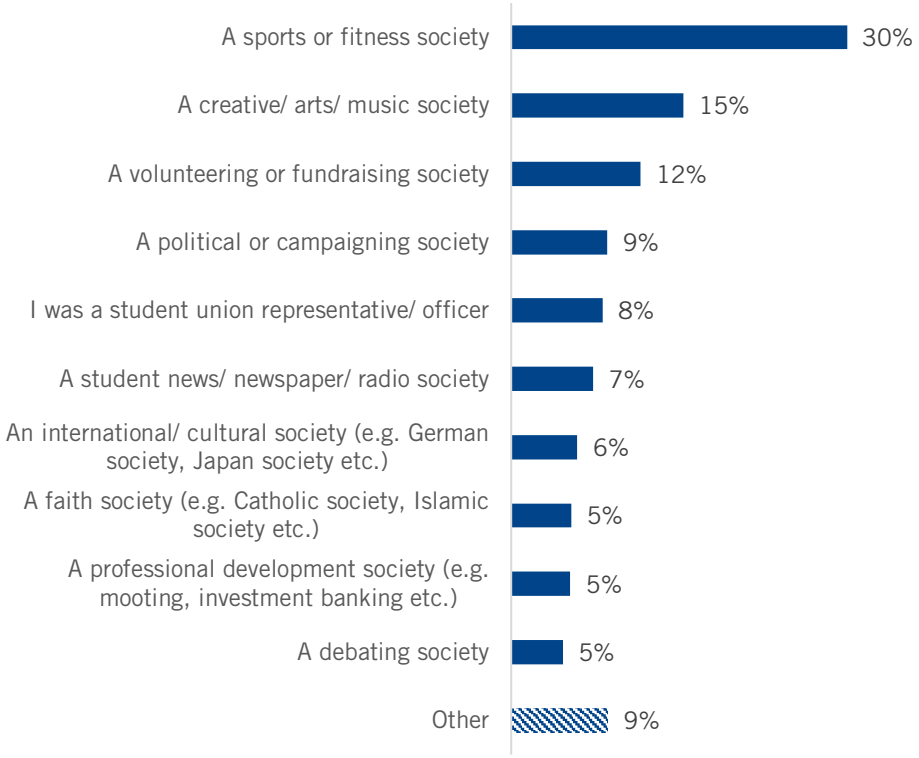
Figure 5: Types of work experience by university type attended



Societies

Looking in more detail at the types of societies students take part in (see Figure 6), the most popular societies were sports or fitness related, with just under a third (30%) of all graduates having taken part in a society of this type, followed by creative, art or music societies (15%), and volunteering or fundraising societies (12%). Far smaller proportions of graduates took part in the type of societies which are perhaps more traditionally linked to careers and employability, for example a student newspaper (7%) or a professional development society such as mooting or investment banking (5%).

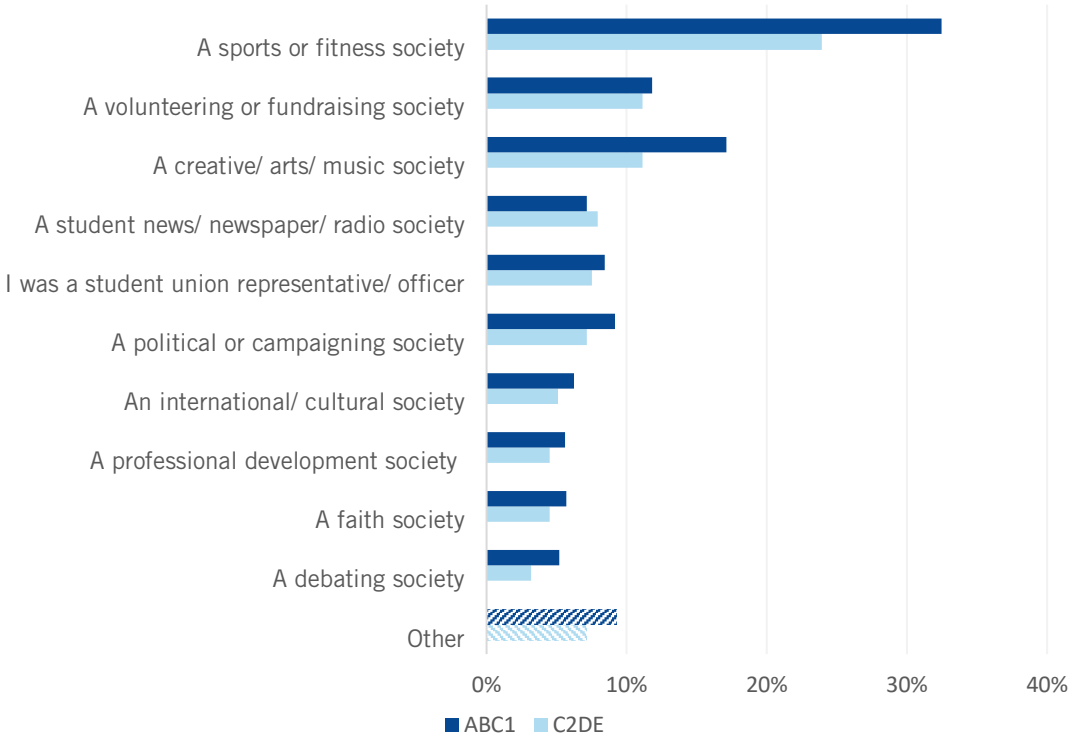
Figure 6: Types of student societies graduates took part in



Similar patterns of participation were also found when the same question was asked to current students, with sports and fitness societies being the most popular (28%), followed by a volunteering of fundraising society (13%) and then creative, arts or musical societies (12%).

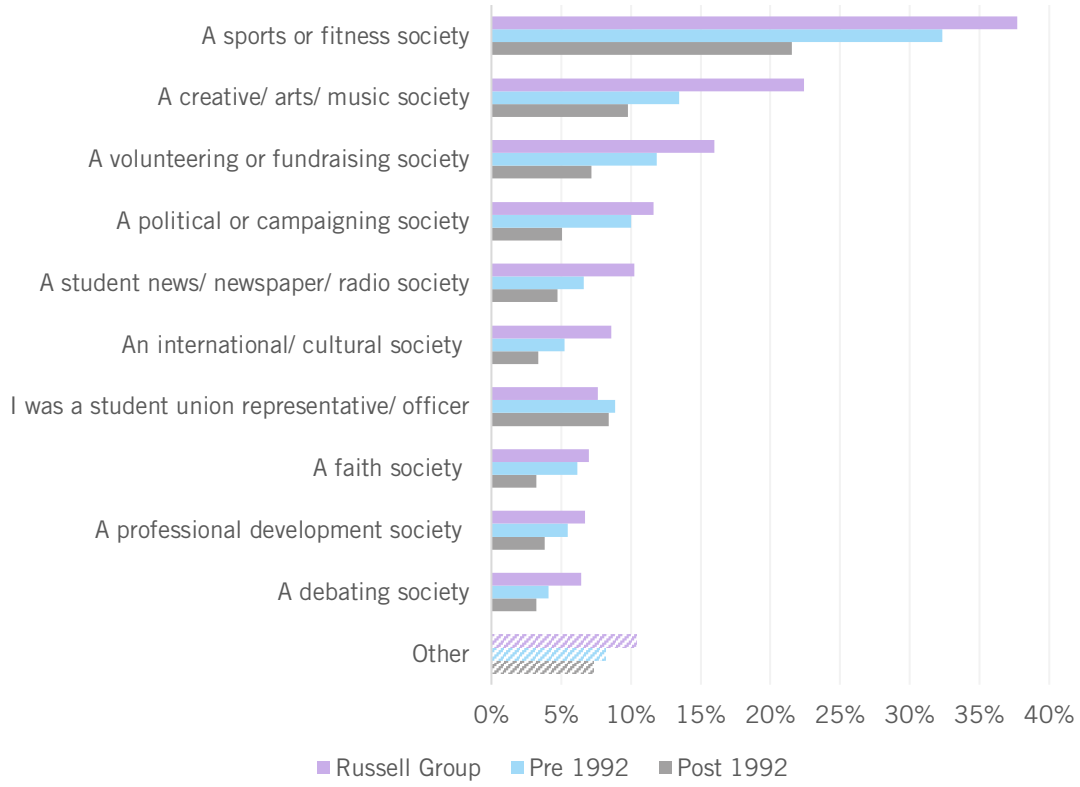
Again, there were substantial differences in the societies which graduates had taken part in by their socio-economic background (Figure 7). While almost a third (32%) of graduates from better-off backgrounds took part in a sports or fitness society, only just under a quarter (24%) of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds had done so. Similarly, 17% of better-off graduates were part of a creative, arts or music society, compared to just 11% of those from less well-off backgrounds. And while 5% of graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds had taken part in a debating society, that rate was 3% for students from less well-off backgrounds. While the differences in other types of society were smaller, graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to take part in almost every type of society included here.

Figure 7: Types of student societies graduates took part in, by socio-economic background



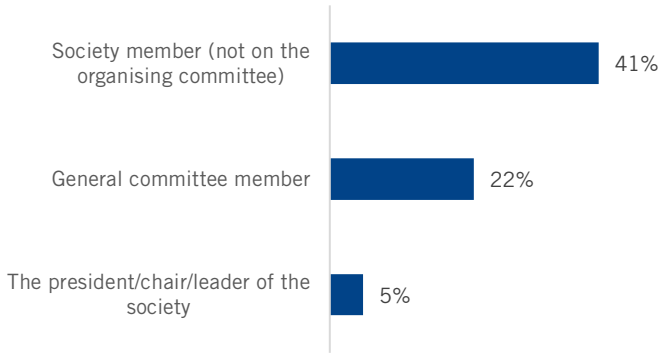
Breaking down the type of society graduates were a part of by the type of institution they attended (Figure 8), there were also substantial differences, with the biggest disparities between graduates of Russell Group and Post-1992 universities, with graduates of Pre-1992 usually falling somewhere between the two. While almost 40% of graduates from Russell Group institutions attended a sport or fitness society, just over half of that proportion (22%) did so from Post-1992 institutions. This same pattern is repeated across almost all societies types covered here, with one notable exception; graduates from all three types of institution were similarly likely to have been a student union representative or officer.

Figure 8: Types of student societies graduates took part in, by university type



Results were broadly similar for current students, who were also asked about their roles within student societies, 22% of all students had helped to organise a society as a general committee member, and 5% had run the society as a president or chair (Figure 9). Interestingly, when looking at the same question by socio-economic background, of the students taking part in societies, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were slightly less likely to serve as committee members (24% for ABC1 vs 20% for C2DE), but similarly likely to be presidents or chairs of societies (5% for both groups).

Figure 9: Students' roles within societies

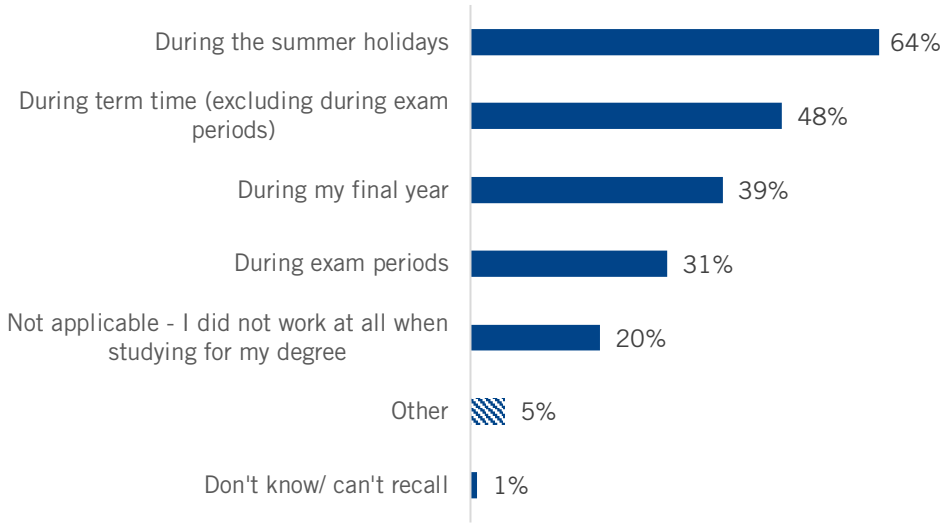


Paid work

Graduates were asked whether they worked during their degree, including which periods of time they worked in; work carried out in the summer holidays being less likely to be disruptive than for example work undertaken during exam periods.

A sizeable proportion of graduates reported working during term time. Just under a third (31%) undertook paid work during their exam periods, 39% worked during the final year of their degree (when workloads usually increase for students), and almost half (48%) worked during term time (see Figure 10). While many graduates reported working during term time, the most common form of work was during the summer holidays, with 64% of graduates saying they worked during this period. 23% of graduates had worked during summers only, while 25% reported having worked during all these periods.

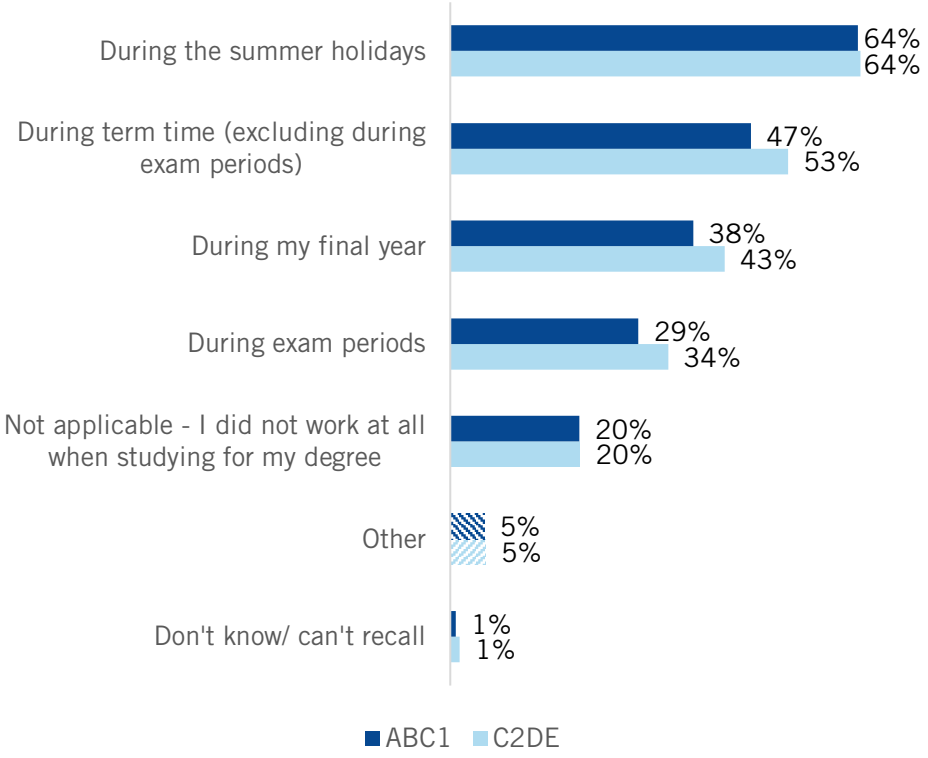
Figure 10: Time periods in which graduates worked during their degree



Although graduates from all socio-economic backgrounds were equally likely to work during their time at university, and the same proportion (64%) of students across socio-economic backgrounds worked during their summer holidays, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have worked during term time (see Figure 11). Over a third (34%) of less well-off students worked during their exam periods, compared to 29% of better-off students). Worse off students were also more likely to have worked during their final year (43% vs 38%) and during term time excluding exam periods (53% vs 47%).

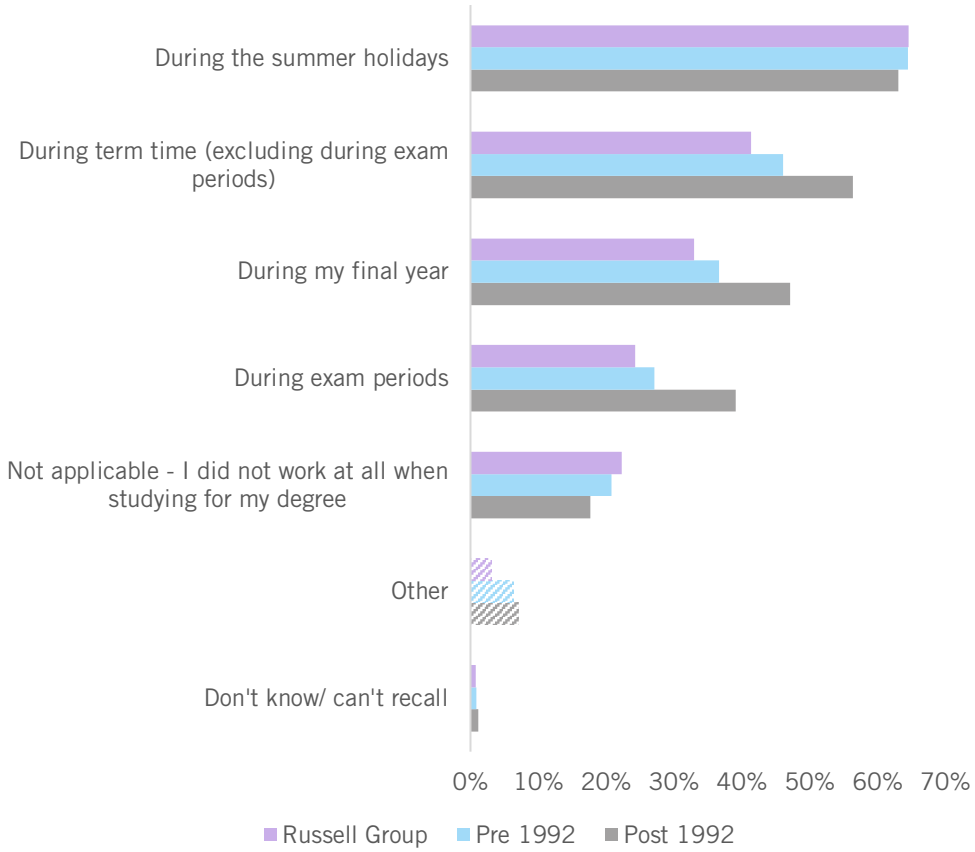
Overall, better off students were more likely to have worked in summer only (25% v 19%), and less likely to have worked during all the specified periods (24% v 29%). Given the detrimental impact work can have on student's university attainment, it is of great concern than students from working class backgrounds are more likely to do so during term time.

Figure 11: Time periods in which graduates worked during their degree, by socio-economic background



There were also substantial differences in when graduates had worked by university type (Figure 12). While graduates of all institutions were equally likely to have worked during the summer, those from Post 1992s were more likely to work during exam periods (39% vs 27% at Pre-1992s and 24% at RG universities), during their final year (47% vs 37% and 33%), and during term time outside of exam periods (56% vs 46% and 41%).

Figure 12: Time periods in which graduates worked during their degree, by institution type



Development of essential life skills at university

The next section looks at how young people perceived the impact of the activities they took part in at university, and whether they helped them to develop essential life skills, such as resilience, confidence, motivation and communication - skills the Trust have previously identified are highly valued by employers.[39]

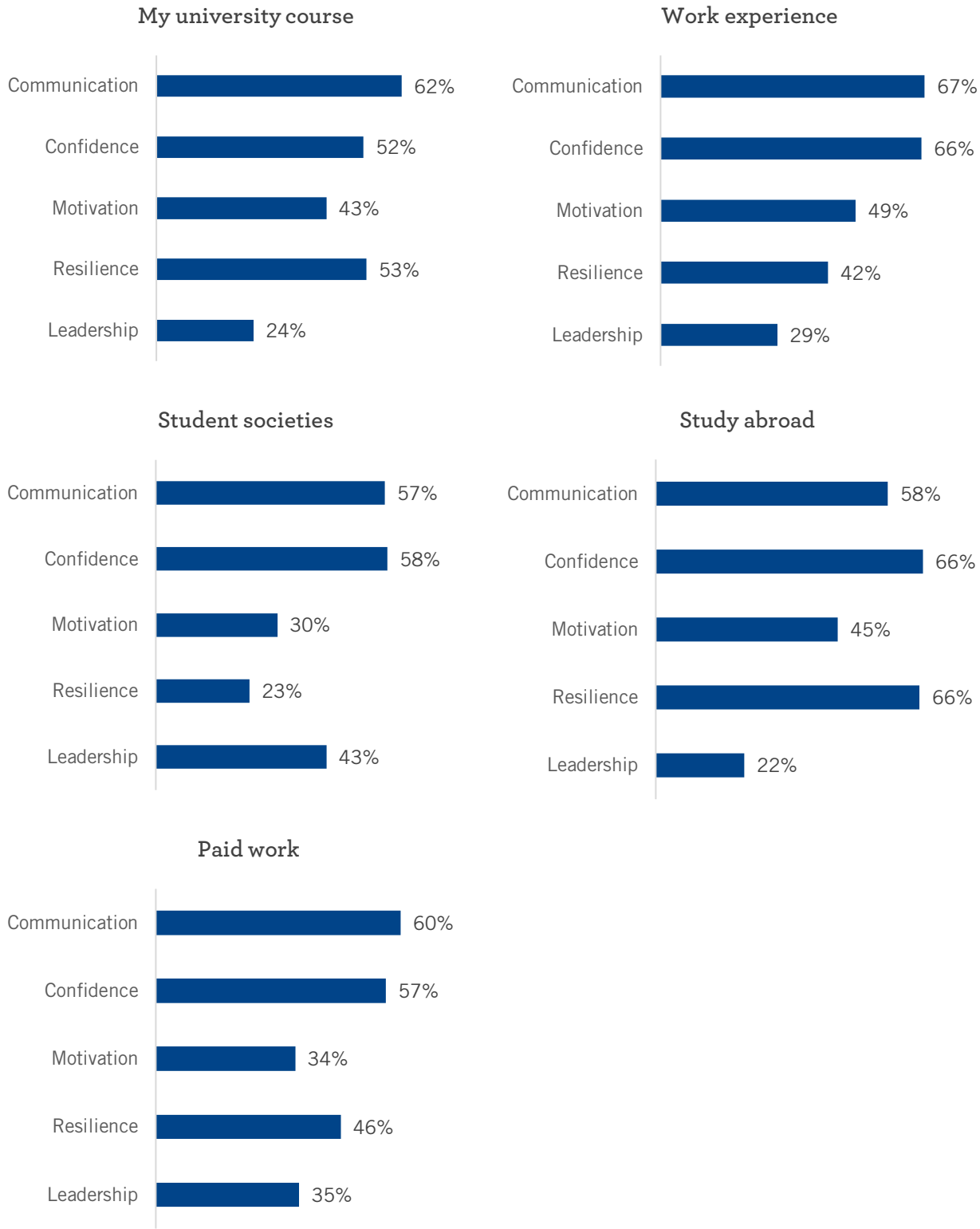
While many felt their course had helped them to develop skills such as communication (62%) and resilience (53%), only a small proportion said their course had helped them to develop leadership skills, and several of the skills were reported to have been better developed through other activities (see Figure 13). This, together with the variability in skills developed by each activity, demonstrate the clear importance for students to be able to take part in a wide range of activities outside of their course, to ensure they have the chance to develop a range of skills.

Across most activities, communication was the skill graduates were the most likely to say had been improved, with 67% of those who did work experience placements, 57% of those taking part in student societies, 58% of those who studied abroad and 60% of those who carried out paid work saying that activity they took part in had improved their communication skills. Similarly, confidence was also a skill graduates felt had been improved across multiple activities, with 66% of those who had completed a work experience placement or who studied abroad, 58% of those doing student societies and 57% of those who did paid work saying the activity they took part in helped them to develop this skill.

Other skills were more variable between activities. For example, while 43% of those who took part in student societies felt that activity had developed their leadership skills, 29% of the graduates who had carried out a work experience placement felt it had done the same. Similarly, while 66% of graduates who took part in study abroad felt it improved their resilience, this was 23% of those taking part in student societies.

[39] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2017) Life Lessons. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/life-lessons-workplace-skills/

Figure 13: Graduate views on whether activities improved their life skills



Looking at graduates' views on their degree course and the development of essential life skills, views differed by socio-economic background, with the largest difference being in whether graduates felt their course had developed their motivation. While 45% of graduates from middle class backgrounds felt their course had increased their motivation, only 37% of graduates from working class backgrounds felt the same. It is well known that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have lower retention rates,[40] therefore this difference in motivation may be a reflection of that difference.

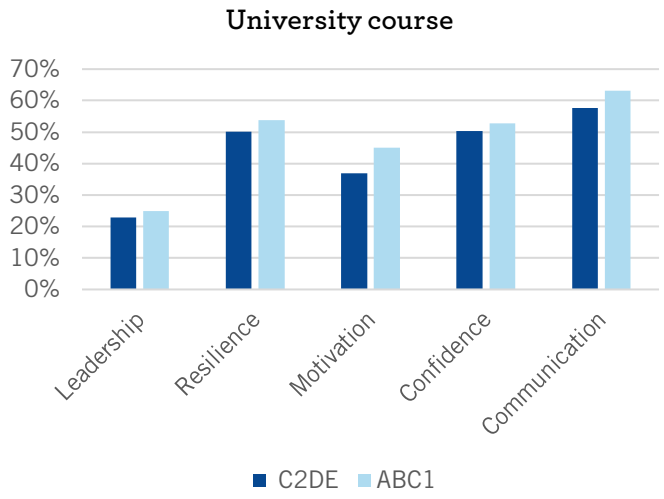
There were also differences in whether graduates felt activities had developed their life skills by socio-economic background (Figure 14). The largest differences in perceived skills gained were for students who had studied abroad. Graduates from less well-off backgrounds who had studied abroad were less likely to say that the experience had built their communication skills (45% vs 61%), confidence (57% vs 69%) or resilience (51% vs 69%) when compared to better students. It is not clear why such large differences exist for this activity. There are several possible explanations, for example students from less well-off backgrounds may not be able to make the most of their experience abroad due to monetary constraints or may not have access to as much information. More research is needed to explore the reasons behind these disparities.

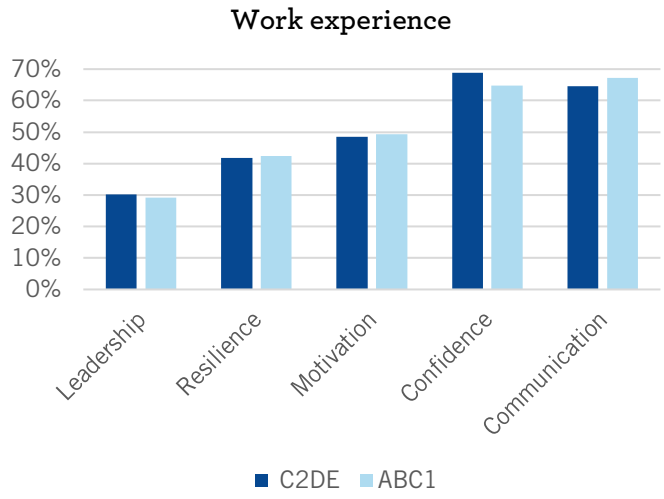
Looking to other activities, there were also differences in reported skills developed by socio-economic background. For example, graduates from working class backgrounds were also much less likely to say student societies developed their leadership skills (35% vs 45% of those from better-off backgrounds). Similarly, working class graduates were slightly less likely to say their confidence developed (55% vs 59%). While 65% of middle-class graduates said that a work experience placement had developed their confidence, a slightly higher proportion (69%) of students from working class backgrounds said the same, although this difference was not statistically significant.

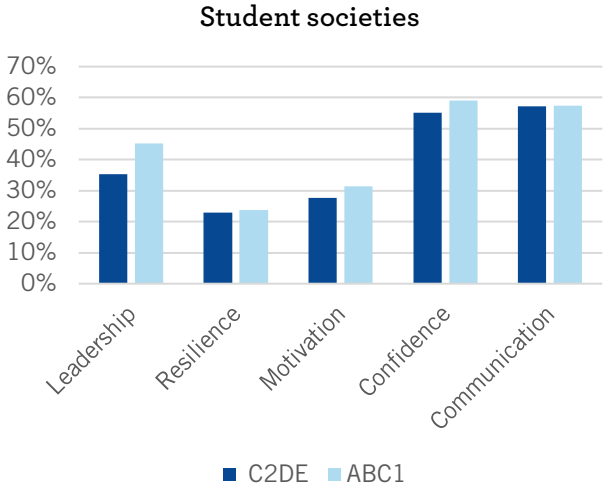
Finally, when interpreting these findings, it is important to take into account that they are based on the self-perceptions of graduates, which may themselves differ by socio-economic background. So for example, graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds may be better at identifying when activities have developed skills, for example because they are likely to have had better access to advice when preparing for job applications, which will often require applicants to discuss how they have developed skills through previous experiences. However, while this may account for some of the smaller differences seen across skills, any such differences are unlikely to account for the large differences reported by graduates in specific skills in some activities. Additionally, any differences in self-perception are in and of themselves an important issue, because it may affect how well graduates then discuss the skills they have developed in job interviews or in the workplace itself. Overall, the differences in life skill development discussed in this section are important ones, which may have consequences for graduates in the workplace.

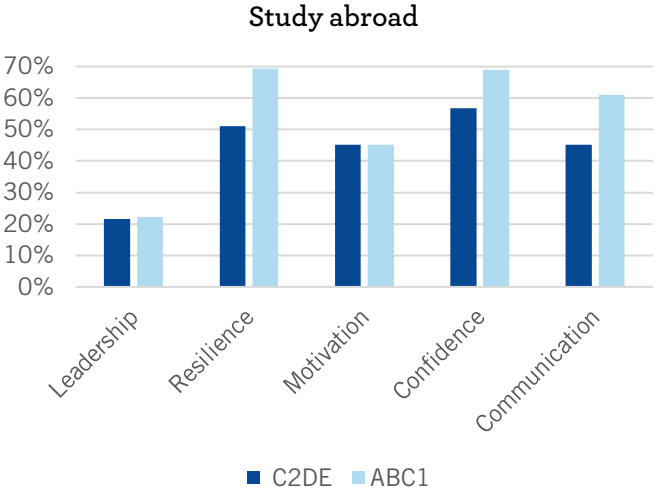
[40] Crawford, C. (2014). Socio-economic differences in university outcomes in the UK: drop-out, degree completion and degree class. Available at: https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7420

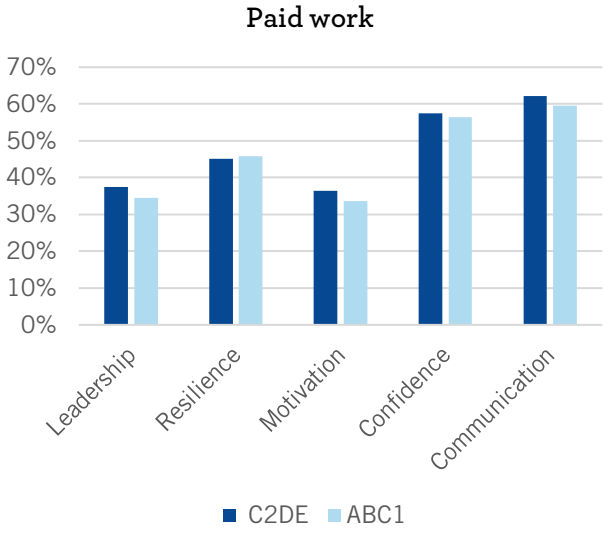
Figure 14: Graduate views on whether activities improved their life skills by socio-economic background











There were also differences in whether graduates felt their life skills had been developed depending on the type of institution they attended (Figure 15). For example, while almost half (49%) of students at Russell Group universities who took part in student societies felt they had developed leadership skills, a smaller proportion of those in Pre 1992 institutions (43%), and a far smaller proportion of those from Post 1992 institutions (32%) felt the same. Students from RG institutions were also more likely to say they had developed confidence (65%) and communication skills (62%) from student societies than students at Pre (56% for confidence and 58% for communication) or Post 1992 (49% and 50%) institutions.

Similarly, there were big differences in how students who had studied abroad felt their skills had been developed depending on the institution they attended. While just 43% of graduates of Post 1992 institutions who studied abroad felt they had developed resilience, 61% of those at Pre 1992 institutions, and the clear majority (79%) of graduates who did so from RG universities. There were also similar differences in the development of confidence and communication skills from study abroad by the type of university they attended.

Figure 15: Graduate views on whether activities improved their life skills by institution type

Barriers to participation

Findings in the first data section of this report showed there are some sizable gaps in participation between different types of graduates, with access gaps between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds and between those from different types of institutions for many activities at university. And these gaps are likely to matter for graduates' prospects, with the last section demonstrating that many of these activities are of real value to graduates in their development of the essential life skills valued by employers.

The next section looks at barriers to participation, including the reasons why graduates did not take up certain activities, to get clues at how access could be opened up to all students.

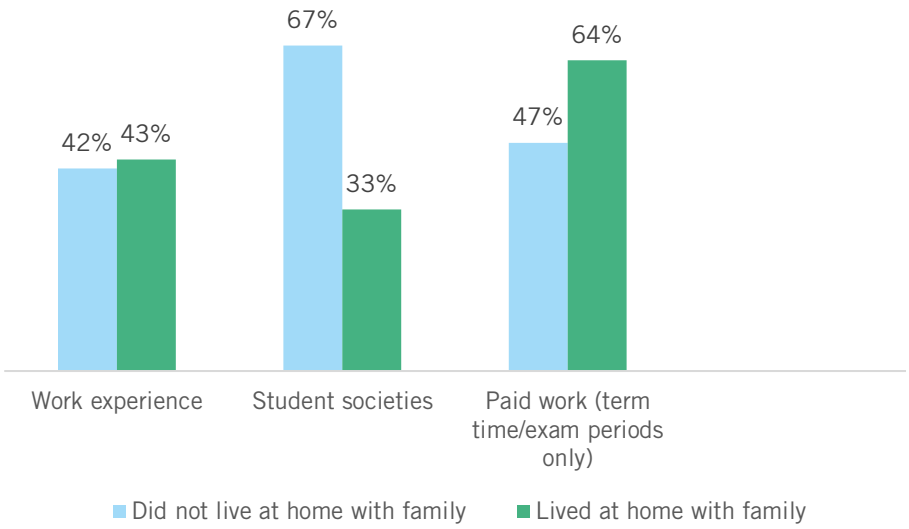
Living at home

Most graduates lived away from home when they were at university, with 59% living away from home less than an hour's commute from university and 23% away from home more than an hour away. A smaller proportion lived at home with their family, with 12% doing so less than an hour from university, and 6% living with their family more than an hour away. Graduates from working class backgrounds were more likely to have lived at home (24%) than those from middle class backgrounds (16%).

Similarly, just over half (55%) of current students polled were living away from home, less than an hour from university, with 12% living away from home more than an hour away. 24% lived with their families less than an hour away, and 9% were living with their families over an hour away. Students from working class families were more likely to live at home (59%), than those from middle-class backgrounds (45%).

As might be expected, there were differences in participation between graduates who had lived at home with their families while at university and those who did not (Figure 16). While the proportion of graduates who carried out work experience placements did not differ, there was a substantial difference in the proportion of graduates taking part in student societies, with 67% of graduates not living at home taking part, compared to just half that (33%) for those who lived at home. The same was found for current students, with 66% of those living away from home taking part, compared to only 38% of those living in their family home. Graduates who lived at home were also much more likely to have carried out paid work during term time or exam periods, with 64% doing so compared to 47% of those living away from home. This difference is likely due to a greater economic need to do paid work for this group, an issue which may also have contributed to their decision to live at home.

Figure 16: Activities young graduates took part in at university, by whether they lived with or away from their families



Living at home had a similar impact on participation in student societies regardless of socio-economic background, with about a 30 percentage point gap between those living at home and those living away for graduates from middle class backgrounds (69% of those living away participating compared to 36% of those living at home), and those from working class backgrounds (60% vs 28%). Living at home in and of itself does not affect participation more for working class students, but more working class students living at home is impacting on their overall participation levels.

Middle class graduates who lived away from home were much less likely than other groups to be working during term time or exams (45%). In comparison, a higher proportion (68%) of middle class graduates who lived at home worked in term time or during exams, perhaps representing a group of students not receiving enough in maintenance loans but whose families can also not afford to support them, potentially leading them to live at home to save money and to take on paid work. Students from working class background were similarly likely to be working during these times regardless of whether they lived at home, with 57% of those living at home working in these periods, compared to a slightly smaller proportion, 53%, living away from home.

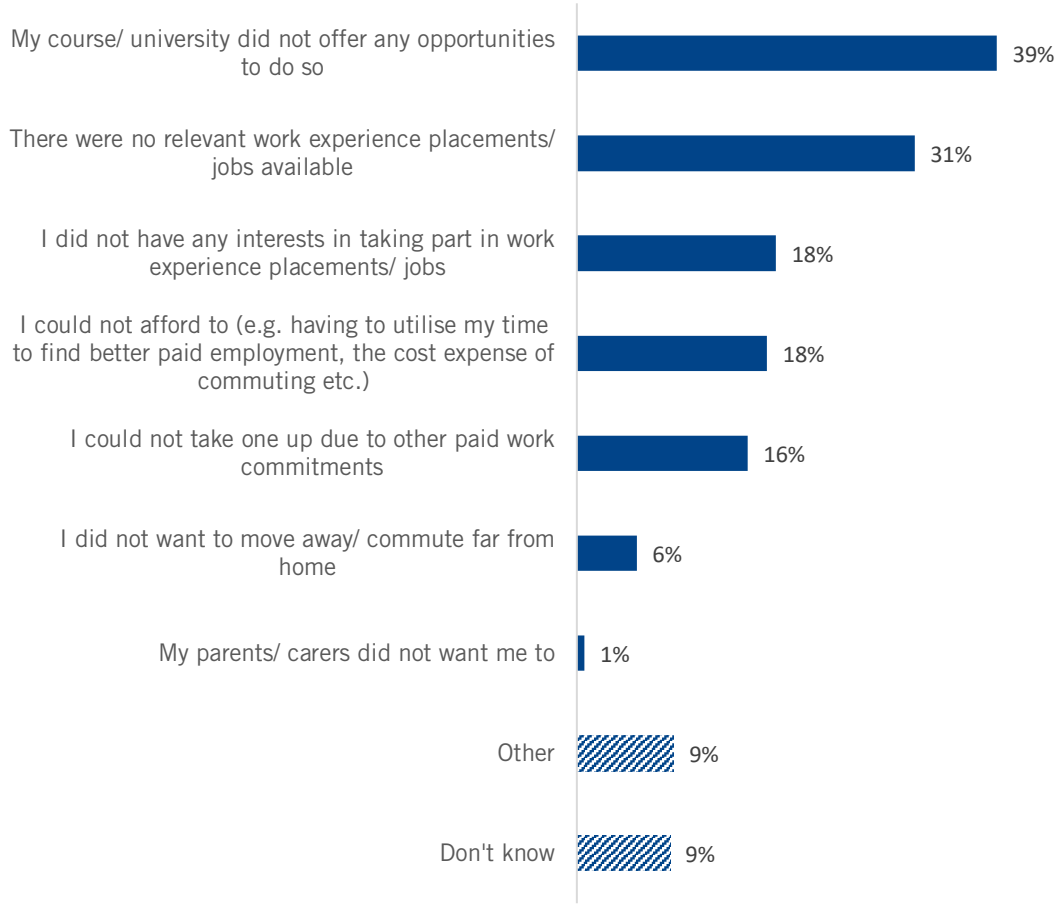
Work experience

Graduates who did not take part in work experience relevant to their course or career interests were asked about possible barriers to their participation. There were a variety of reasons why they had not carried out a placement (Figure 17). The largest proportion (39%) reported their university or course did not give them the opportunity to do so, while 31% said there were no work experience placements or relevant jobs available. These findings demonstrate that it is likely there is scope for universities, together with employers, to increase the number of placements available to open up access. However there may be regional variations in the number of appropriate placements available to students studying at different universities due to local economic and labour market circumstances.

Almost a fifth (18%) of these graduates cited cost as a barrier, saying they could not afford to take up the opportunity, and 16% said they were unable due to other paid work commitments. For these graduates, more money being available to help to cover the cost of doing a placement, or to reduce the need to work, could have the potential to increase access. 18% of these graduates said they had no

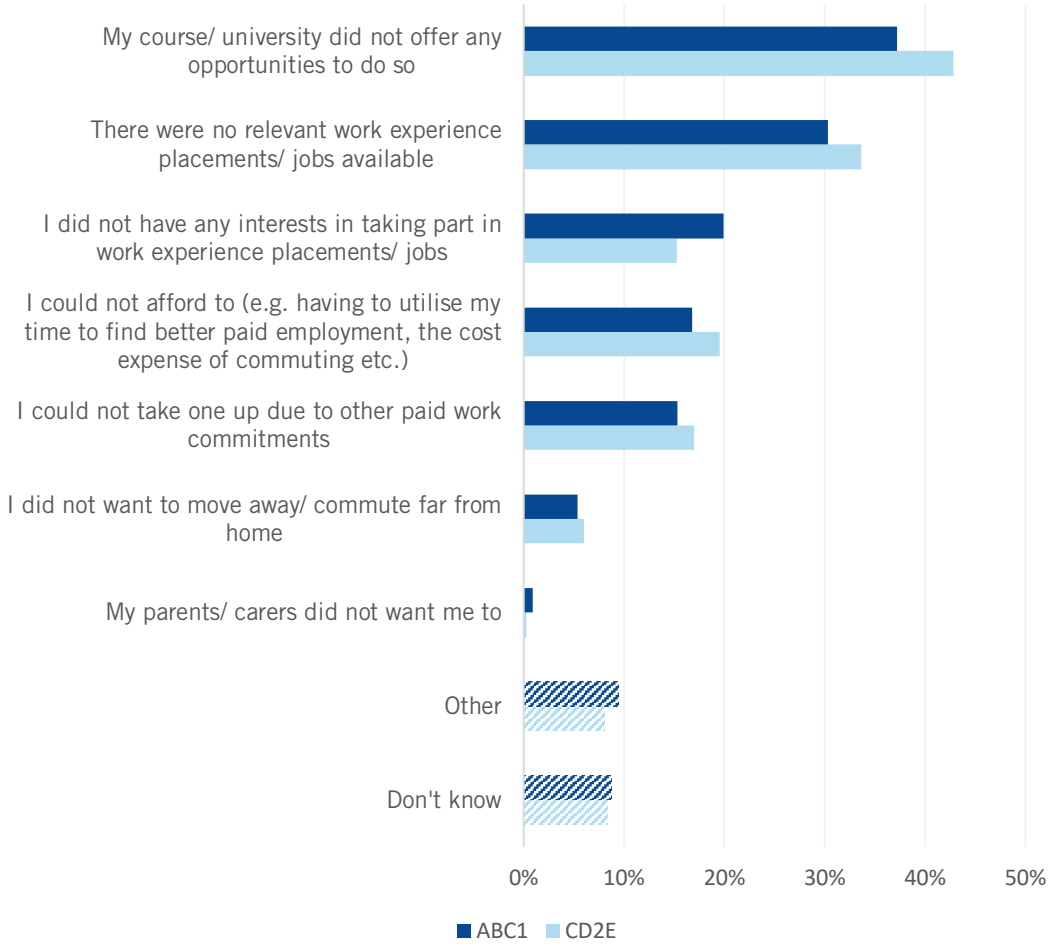
interest in doing a work placement. We do not however know if these graduates weren't interested because such placements aren't required in their preferred industries, or because they didn't see the benefits of such experiences.

Figure 17: Reasons graduates did not carry out work experience placements



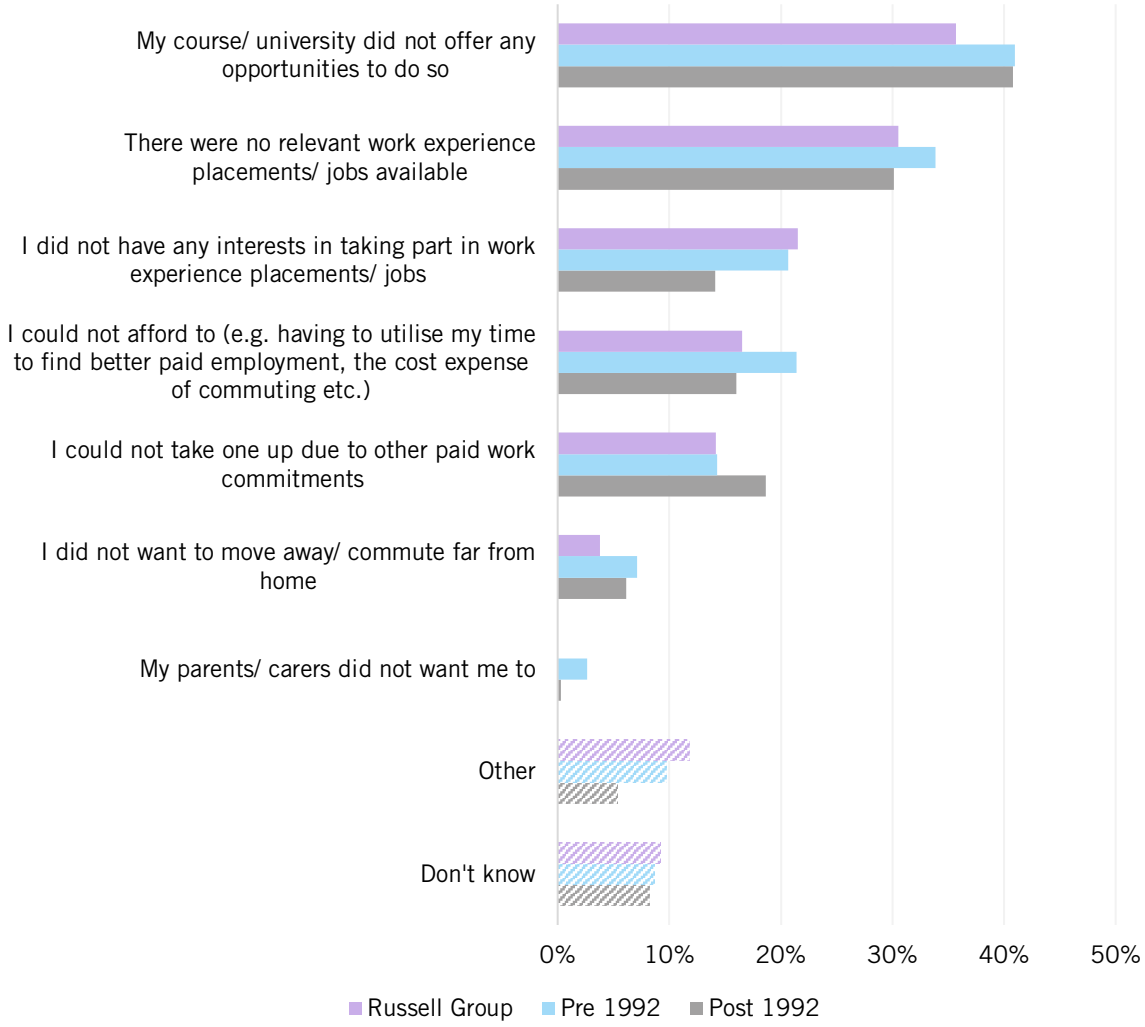
Graduates from less well-off families were less likely to say they did not do a placement because they did not want to take one up (15% vs 20% of better-off graduates), and indeed these graduates were more likely to cite several barriers to participation (see Figure 18). 20% of graduates from poorer backgrounds did not take up a placement because they could not afford to, for example because of a need to spend the time in better paid employment or the cost of commuting, compared to 15% of better off graduates. Finding placements was also an issue for these graduates, who were more likely to say there were no relevant work experience placements available (34% vs 30%) and that their course or university did not offer these opportunities (43% vs 37%), when compared to better-off students.

Figure 18: Reasons graduates did not carry out work experience placements, by socio-economic background



Similarly, graduates from Post 1992 institutions were the least likely to say they did not do a work experience placement because they had no interest in doing so, with only 14% of those who did not do a placement citing this reason, compared to 21-22% in Pre 1992 and RG institutions (see Figure 19). Graduates from Post 1992 institutions were also more likely to say they were unable to do a placement due to other paid work commitments (19% vs 14% at both Pre 1992 and RGs). Graduates of Pre and Post 1992 institutions were the most likely to say their course or university did not offer the option, with 41% of graduates at these institutions who did not do a placement citing this reason, compared to 36% of those from the Russell Group.

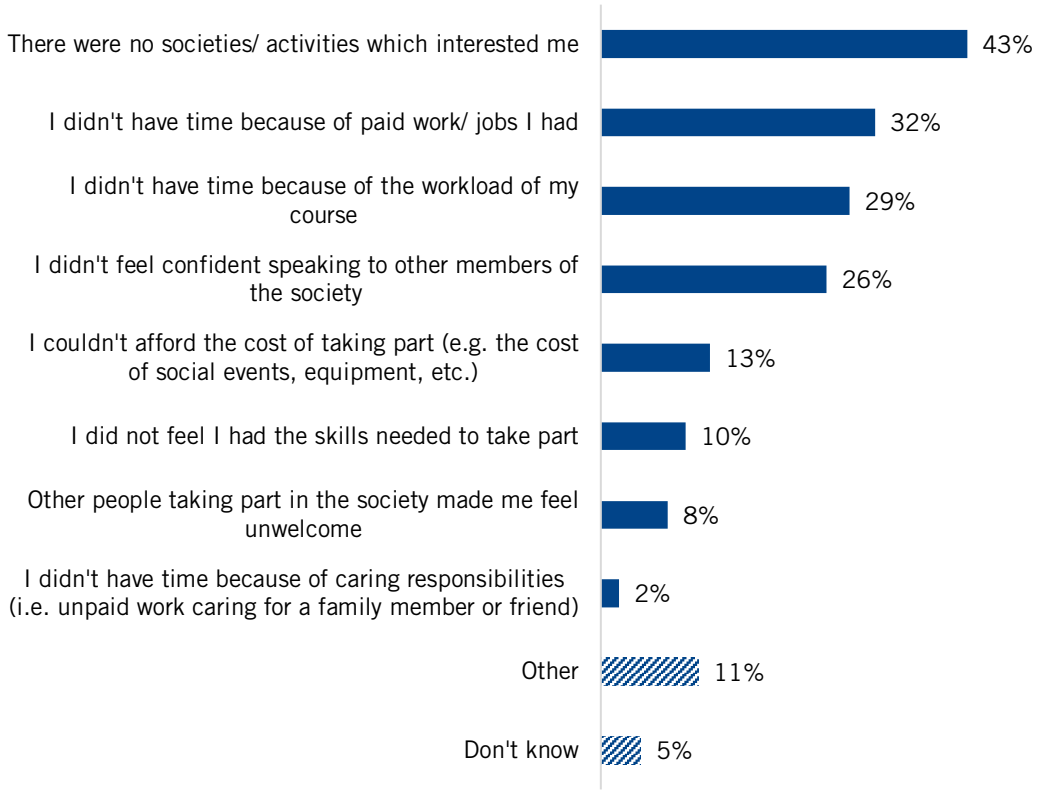
Figure 19: Reasons graduates did not carry out work experience placements, by institution type



Student societies

Graduates who did not take part in any student societies were asked about potential barriers they faced to their participation (Figure 20). Just under half (43%) who did not take part said there were no societies which interested them, 32% said they could not do so due to paid work, and a further 29% said they did not have time due to the workload of their course. Just over a quarter (26%) reported they did not feel confident speaking to other members of the society, and 13% said they could not afford the cost of taking part. A very small proportion (2%) said they could not take part due to caring commitments.

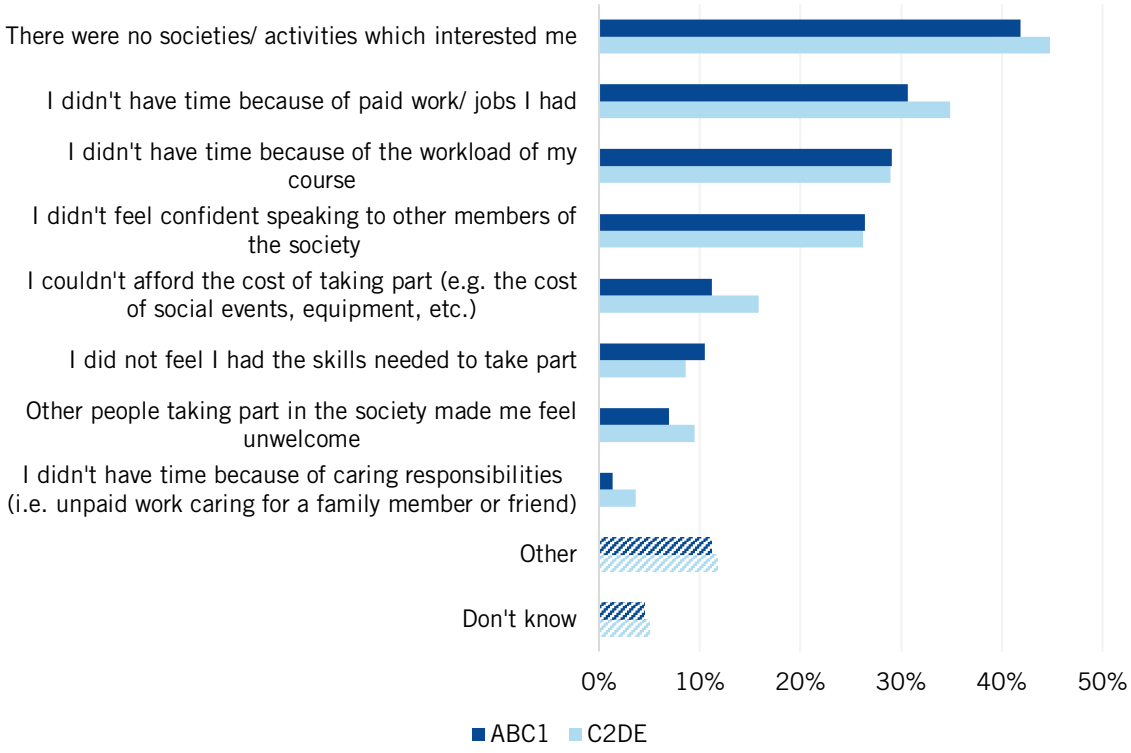
Figure 20: Reasons for lack of participation in student societies and activities



Current students who did not take part in student societies were also polled on barriers to their participation. Interestingly, for this group, the most common reason was not having no activities that interested them, but not having time due to the workload of their courses (49% compared to 29% of graduates who did not take part citing this barrier). Conversely, only 32% of current students said there were no activities which interested them, compared to 43% of graduates. Current students were also less likely to say other people in the society made them feel unwelcome (just 2% compared to 8%), and current students were more likely than graduates to cite caring responsibilities as a barrier (6% vs 2%), but findings for all other barriers were similar between both of the groups polled.

Breaking these findings for graduates down by socio-economic background, those who did not take part from less well-off families were more likely to cite responses related to money (see Figure 21).

Figure 21: Reasons for lack of participation in student societies and activities by socio-economic background



Graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were 5 percentage points more likely to say the cost of taking part had been a barrier (16% vs 11%), and 4 percentage points more likely to say they did not have time due to paid work (35% vs 31%). This reflects findings that these students were more likely to work during term time. Similarly, when looking at current students, 12% of all students from a lower socio-economic background were not taking part in societies because of paid work, compared to only 8% of all students from better-off backgrounds

An example of a fund at the London School of Economics to help students who cannot afford to take part in extra-curricular activities is included in the Case Study 1 below:

CASE STUDY 1 - London School of Economics Student Union Participation Fund

At the London School of Economics, any student who is struggling to pay for a club, society or event can apply for funding from the Participation Fund through the Student Union.

Students are asked why they cannot afford to take part (giving an outline of their current and expected income), and why the activity will have a positive impact on their university experience.

The fund exists to remove any financial barriers to participation in activities within the student union. The money can be used to cover a club or society membership and participation costs, to fund participation in a society trip, or to purchase sports kit or equipment.

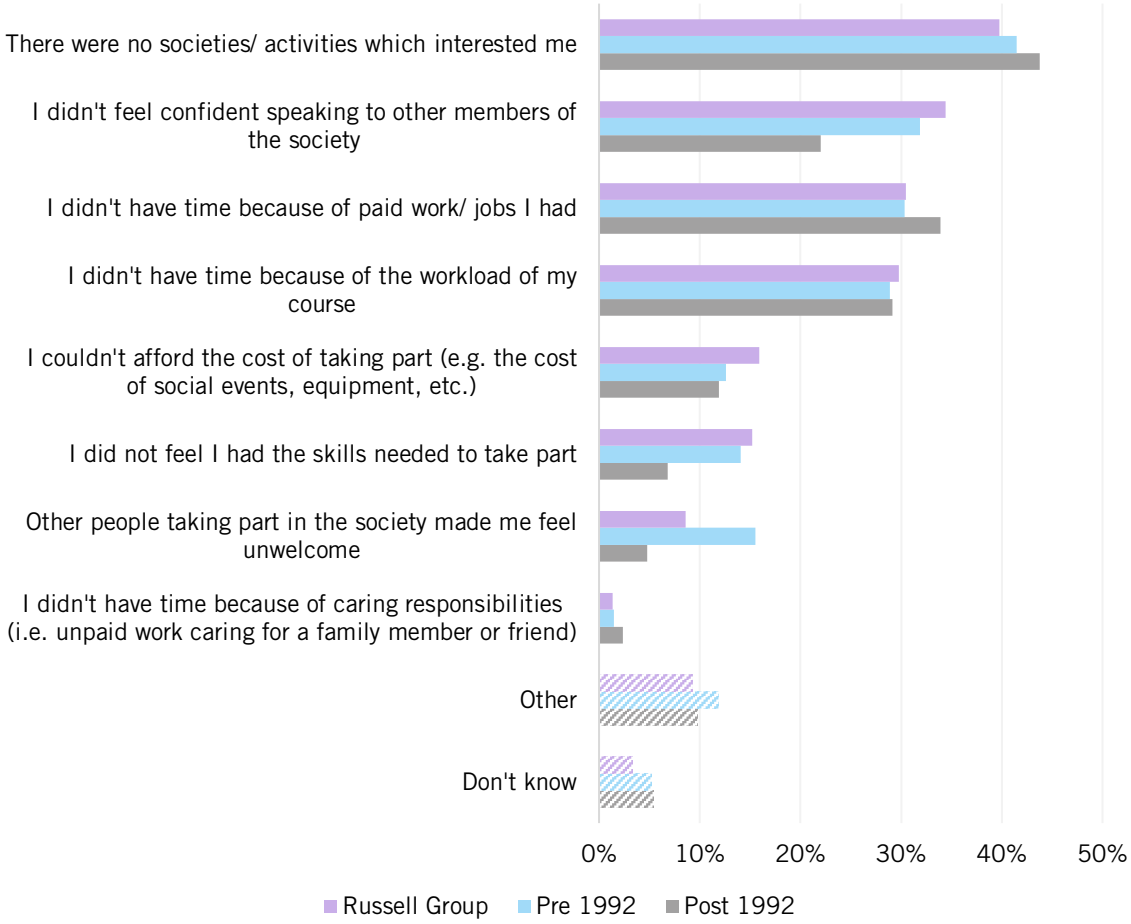
Although only small numbers of graduates cited caring responsibilities as a barrier, there were substantial differences by socio-economic background: just 1% of those from better off backgrounds said caring responsibilities were a barrier to their participation, but this figure was four times higher at 4% for those from less well-off backgrounds.

Looking at non-monetary barriers, less well-off graduates were slightly more likely to say no societies interested them (45% vs 42%) and were more likely to say other members of the society made them feel unwelcome (10% vs 7%) but, were slightly less likely to say they did not have the skills needed to take part (9%) compared to better-off graduates (11%). As seen previously, graduates from Post-1992 institutions were the least likely to take part in student societies. Across all institution types, the most common reason that graduates did not take part in student societies remained that there were no societies or activities that interested them, although this was a higher proportion for graduates in Post 1992s (44%), compared to Pre 1992s (41%) and RG institutions (40%) (see Figure 22). It's also important to keep in mind that due to the higher proportion of students from Post 1992s not taking part in societies, even the same proportion of those citing any one reason will translate to a larger number of students facing that barrier overall.

The second most cited reason did however differ substantially between university types. While both RG (34%) and Pre 1992 (32%) graduates reported they did not feel confident speaking to other members of the society, only 22% of graduates from Post 1992 universities cited this reason, with a larger proportion (34% compared to 30% at other university types) instead saying they did not have time due to paid work. A similar proportion of graduates across all institution types said the workload of their course was a barrier (29% to 30%).

Very few graduates from Post-1992 institutions said they did not take part because did not have the skills needed to do so (7%). In contrast, twice the proportion of students who did not take part in societies from RG or Pre-1992 institutions (15% and 14%) cited this as a reason for their lack of participation. Interestingly, there were large differences in the proportion of graduates from different types of institution who said that other people taking part in the society made them feel uncomfortable. At 16%, this figure was far higher for graduates from Pre 1992s, compared to 9% at Russell Group Universities and just 5% from Post 1992.

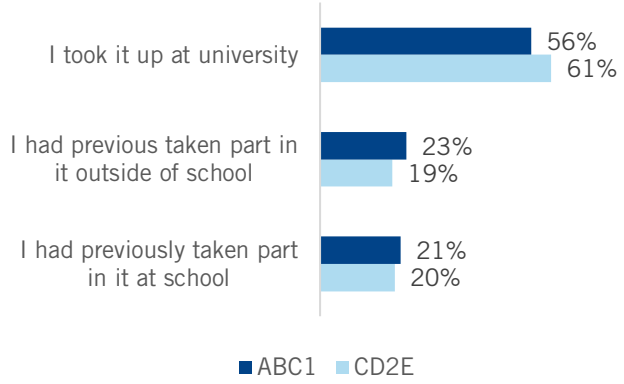
Figure 22: Reasons for lack of participation in student societies by university type



For some activities, young people may first take part in them long before they ever get to university (for example certain sports), already putting others on the back foot when it comes to having the experience or confidence to take part. Current students were also asked, for the society they were the most involved in, when they first got involved in the activity. Most students first took part at university (60%), but about a fifth (19%) had previously taken part at school, and a further fifth (21%) had done so outside of school.

When students first experienced these activities differed by socio-economic background. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to be taking it up for the first time at university (56% vs 61%) and were instead more likely to have previously taken part in it outside of school (23% vs 19% for those from poorer backgrounds, see Figure 23). These differences in previous experience demonstrate that students come to university with greatly varying previous experiences. For many from lower socio-economic backgrounds, university will be the first time they have had access to some of these activities, potentially leaving them behind other students.

Figure 23: For the society students spent the most time taking part in, when they first took part in the activity



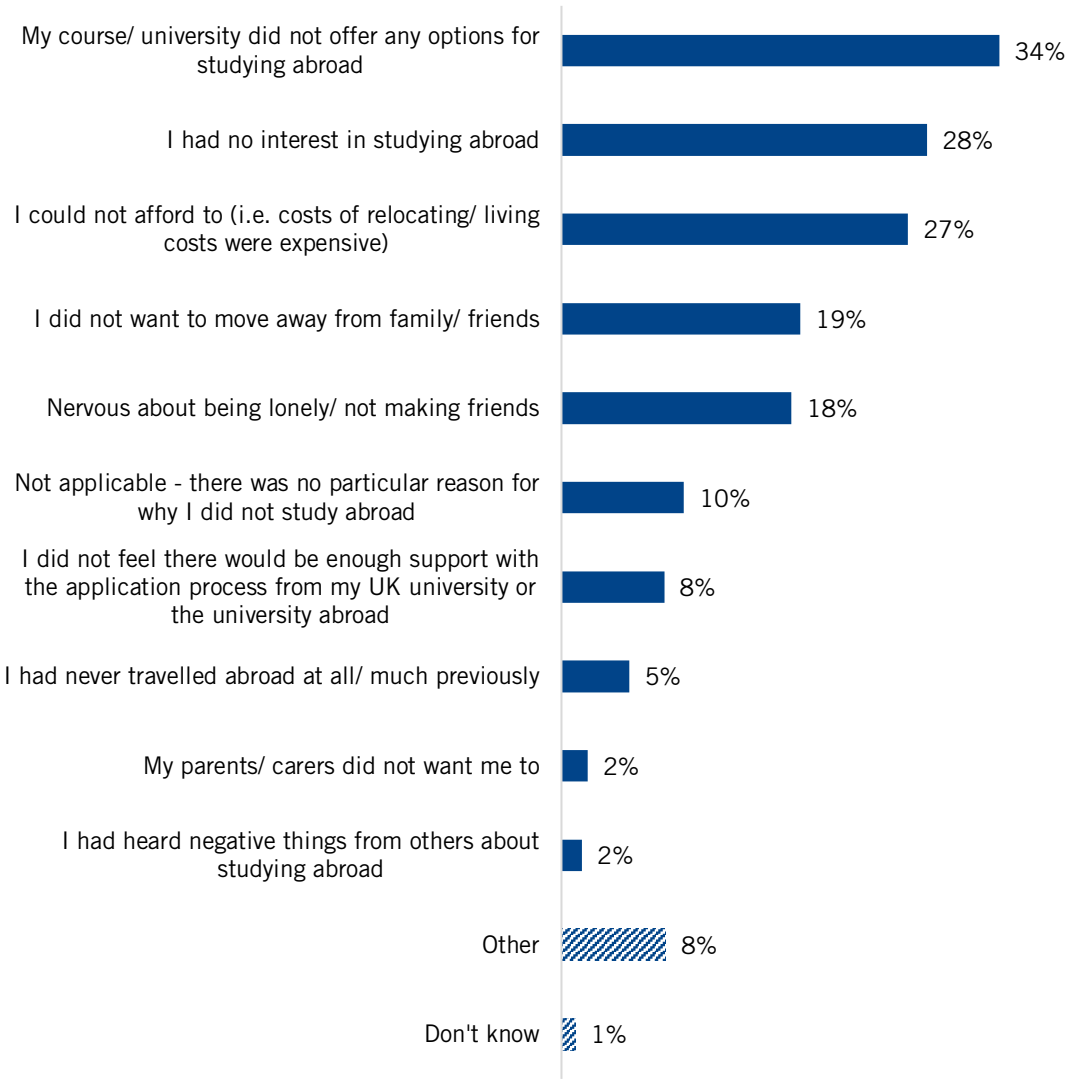
Study abroad

When looking at the potential barriers to participation for students who did not study abroad, it's important to keep in mind that study abroad is a much less common activity than the others discussed in this section so far. While most graduates had undertaken paid work (79%), and many (61%) have taken part in student societies, just 12% had studied abroad. The clear majority of graduates did not study abroad, and it is likely that even if barriers to participation were removed, many of these graduates would still not have studied abroad out of personal choice.

Indeed, a sizeable proportion of those did not study abroad (28%) said they had no interest in doing so, a further 10% said there was no particular reason they had not done so, and others did not want to move away from family and friends (19%) (see Figure 24).

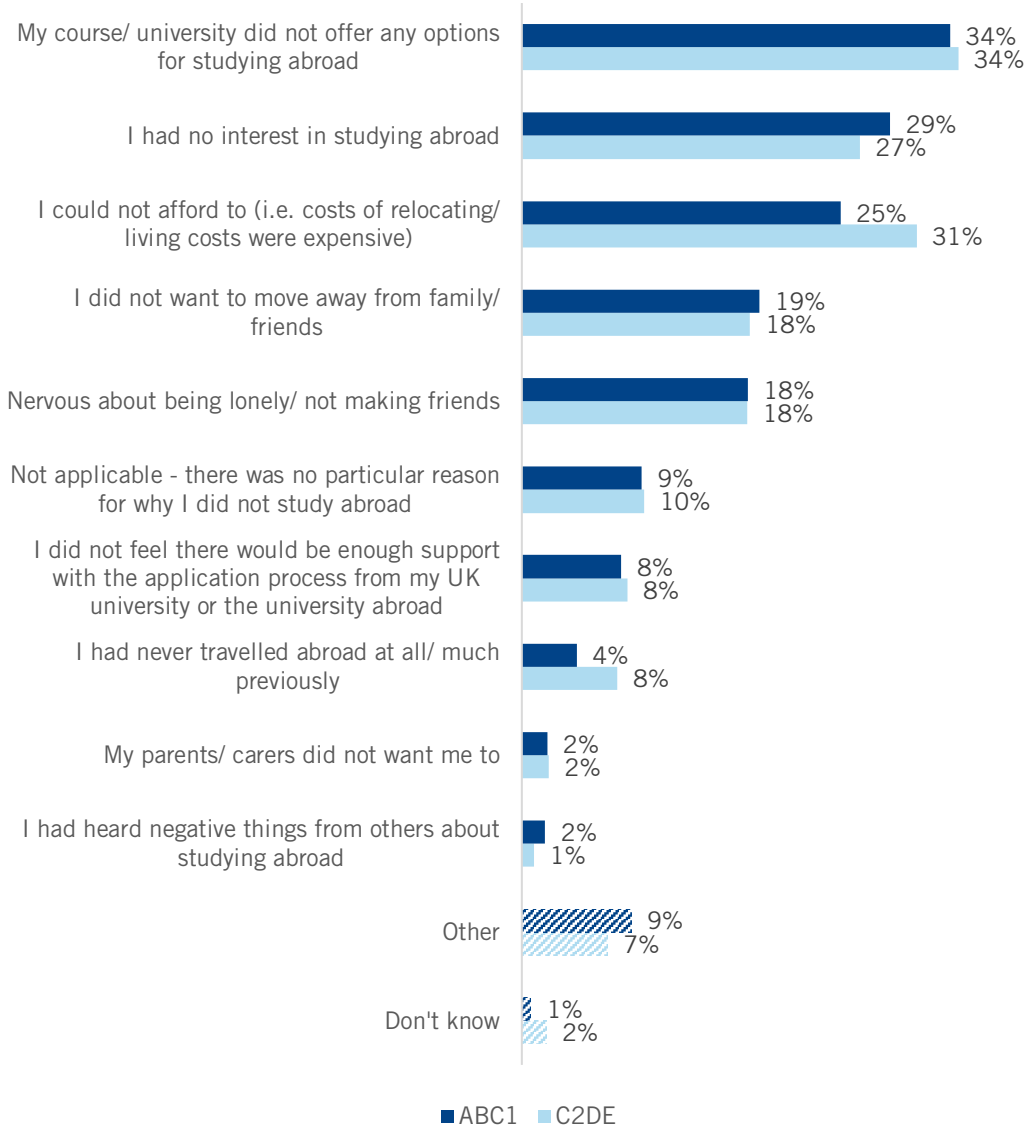
However, many graduates did cite barriers to participation. Just over a third (34%) of those who did not study abroad said that it was not offered as an option in their course or university, and over a quarter (27%) said they could not afford to, for example due to the cost of relocating or living costs abroad.

Figure 24: Reasons graduates did not study abroad



As we have seen in the previous section, graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to take part in study abroad than their better off peers. Graduates who had not studied abroad also experienced different barriers depending on their socio-economic background. While graduates from working and middle class backgrounds were equally likely to say their course or university did not offer the option, graduates from working class backgrounds were more likely to cite cost as a barrier (31% vs 25%), and were twice as likely to say they had not taken part because they hadn't travelled abroad at all or much previously (8% vs 4%) (see Figure 25). Providing more help and support (both financial and otherwise) to these students therefore may be a way to help to open up access to this activity.

Figure 25: Reasons graduates did not study abroad, by socio-economic background



There were also differences in the proportion of graduates having studied abroad depending on the type of institution they attended, with RG graduates being the most likely (15%) and Post-1992 attendees the least (9%). Similarly, there were also differences in the reasons that graduates cited for not having done so. While under a third (31%) of graduates from Russell Group institutions said their course or university did not offer options to study abroad, 41% of graduates from Post-1992 institutions said the same.

Most students who studied abroad did so in Europe, with 9% of all graduates having studied abroad in a European country, compared to 4% doing so further afield outside of the continent. However, graduates from less well-off backgrounds who studied abroad were more likely to do so within Europe (76%, with only a quarter going further afield) compared to those from better-off backgrounds who studied abroad (68%). Opportunities closer to home may be easier for students from poorer backgrounds to access, perhaps related to the higher cost of relocation further afield, and gives a

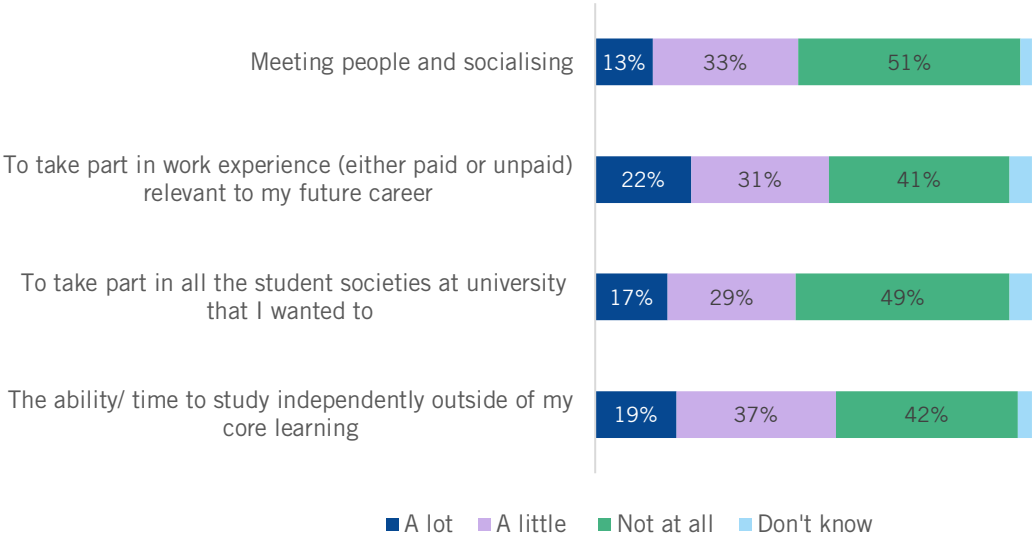
further clue on how best to open up access to this activity for students from all socio-economic backgrounds.

Paid Work

The next section looks at graduates' perception of the impact of work, to examine the ways in which paid work may act as a barrier to participation in other activities.

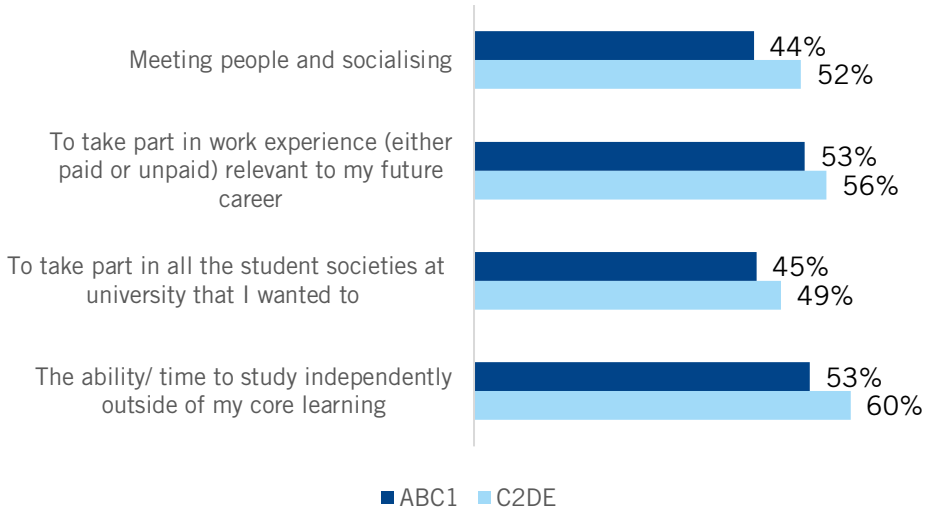
Of the graduates who had worked during university, over half (55%) said it impacted on their ability to study independently, and 53% said it impacted their ability to take part in work experience relevant to their future career (see Figure 26). A sizeable proportion (47%) said it impacted on their ability to meet people and socialise, and 46% said it limited their ability to take part in all the student societies they wanted to. The timing of work was again important, with 74% of those working during all periods reporting it was impacting their study, compared to 26% of those who worked in summers only.

Figure 26: Impact of paid work on other activities



These impacts were also more common for graduates from less well-off backgrounds, who were more likely to report that taking on paid work had a negative impact on their ability to take part in other activities (Figure 27). A large proportion (60%) said it impacted (either a little or a lot) on their ability to study independently, compared to 53% of those from middle-class backgrounds. Similarly, over half (52%) of working class graduates who worked reported that doing so impacted on their ability to meet people and socialise, compared to 44% of their middle class peers. Indeed, working class graduates were more likely to say paid work had an impact on all of the activities asked about here.

Figure 27: Impact of paid work on other activities, by socio-economic background

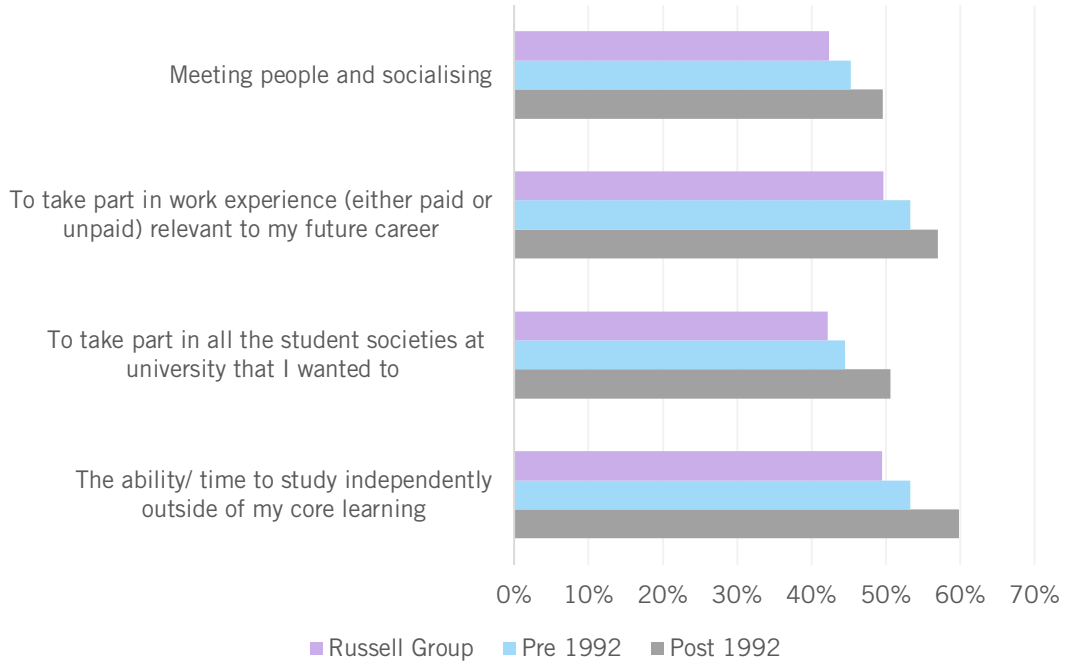


Although graduates from all socio-economic backgrounds were equally likely to take on paid work while at university, as covered previously, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have worked during term-time, their final year and exam periods than their better-off peers. This disparity may help to account for the differences seen here, though we do not have data on the number of hours worked.

There were also differences in reasons for working during term time and exam periods between different university types. Graduates from Post-1992 institutions were most likely to have worked to cover basic living costs (50%), compared to 46% of Russell Group attendees and 40% of those at Post 1992 institutions. Graduates from Russell Group institutions were more likely to say they worked during term time to gain experience for their future career (8%, vs 5% to 6% in Pre and Post 1992s).

While overall rates of paid work were similar across institution types, graduates of Post 1992 institutions were more likely to report working during term time, their final year and exam periods than those from either Post 1992 institutions or the Russell Group. Potentially as a consequence, 60% of graduates from Post-1992s who worked said it impacted their ability and time to study independently, compared to 49% of those from Russell Group institutions (see Figure 28).

Figure 28: Impact of paid work on other activities, by university attended

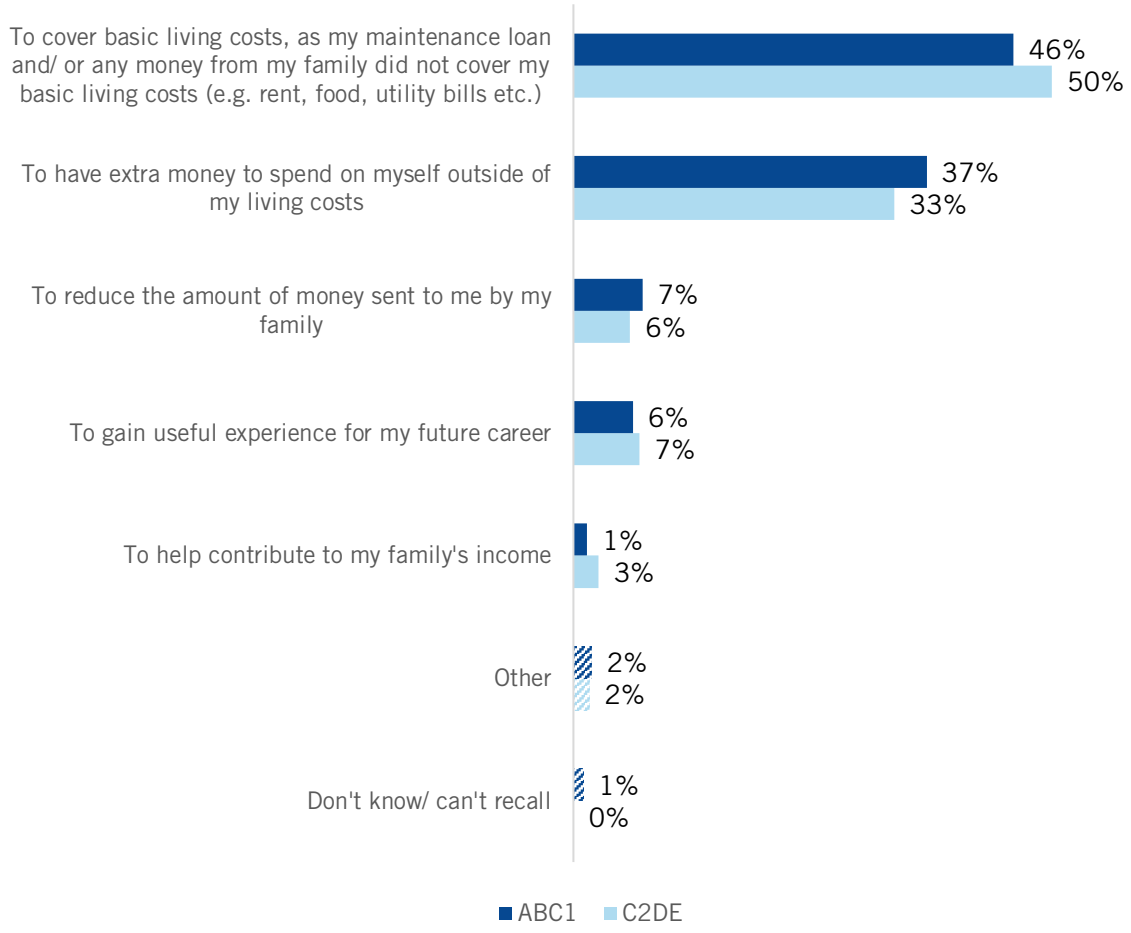


Given the negative impact paid work is having on the ability of students to take part in other activities while at university, and the greater impact of this for graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from some types of institutions, it's important to understand why students are working, especially those working alongside along-side their university contact hours, rather than during the summer holidays.

Among those who worked during term time or exam periods, the most common reason, cited by almost half (47%) was that they worked to cover their basic living costs (such as their rent, food and utility bills), and that this wasn't covered by their maintenance loan or by money given to them by their family. A smaller but still sizeable proportion (36%) worked to have extra money to spend on themselves outside of their living costs, and just 6% said they did so to gain experience for their future career.

Graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds who worked were slightly more likely to say they did so to cover their basic living costs (50% vs 46%) and were less likely to say they did so to have extra money to spend outside of their living expenses (33% vs 37%) (see Figure 29).

Figure 29: Why graduates worked during term time and exam periods during university, by socio-economic background



Current students were also asked whether their maintenance loan and/or money their received from their family is enough to live on while at university. Just under half, 49%, said it was enough to live on, but a large proportion, 46%, said it was not enough, with a further 6% who were unsure. Students from better-off backgrounds (ABC1) were actually more likely to say this funding was not enough (48% vs 41% of C2DE), although poorer students were more likely to be unsure (7% vs 4%). It may be that better-off students are more likely to say the money they receive is not enough because they receive a lower amount of maintenance funding, and it is not always clear to parents how much students will need in addition to their maintenance loan to make up the difference to the full loan amount.[41]

[41] How much the Govt expects you to give your children for university. Money Saving Expert. 16th December 2019. Available at: https://blog.moneysavingexpert.com/2016/09/how-much-are-parents-supposed-to-give-their-children-when-they-go-to-university/

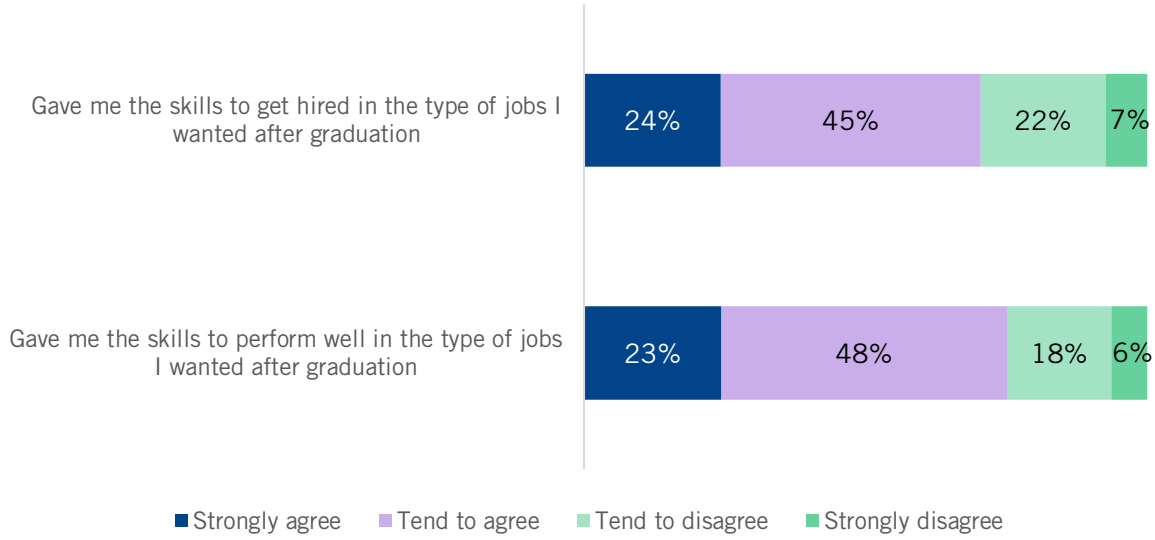
Employability skills development at university

This section looks at the types of employability activities currently on offer in universities, as well as the views of graduates on how well universities helped them to develop skills and prepare for the world of work.

Views of graduates

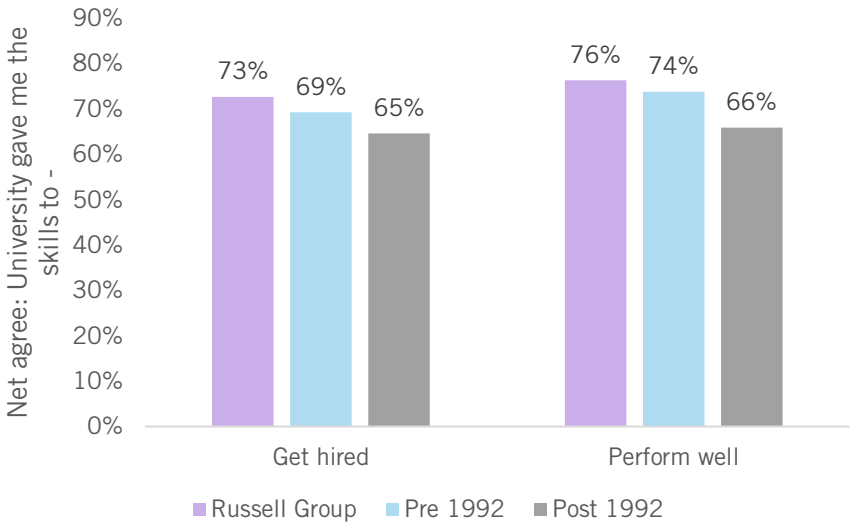
Students were asked how well they felt universities gave them the skills they needed in order to get hired in the jobs that they wanted after graduation (Figure 30). Most students answered positively, with 69% saying they agreed that university had helped them to develop those skills. However, a sizeable proportion, 29%, reported that university had not done so. Similarly, when asked whether their time at university had given graduates the skills needed to perform well once in their jobs, a smaller proportion (24%) said they did not feel university had given them those skills. These findings show that there remains room for universities to improve their provision.

Figure 30: To what extent graduates felt university had given them employability skills



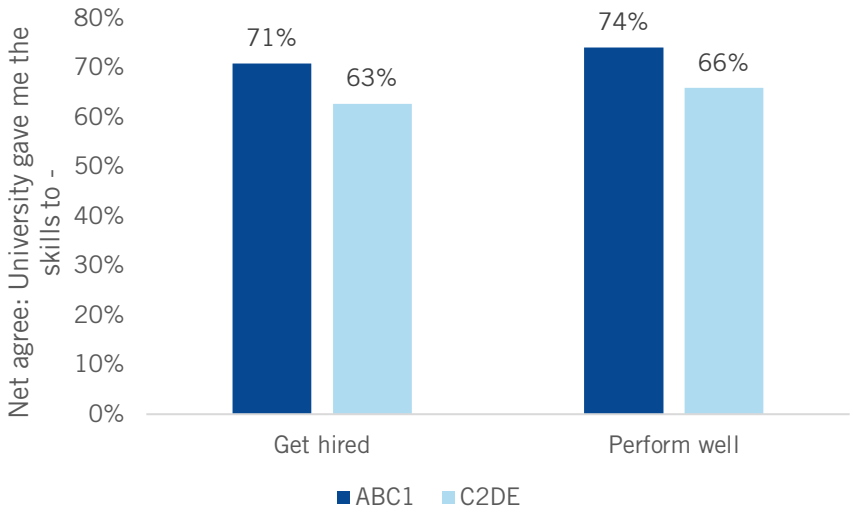
Breaking down these results by the university type graduates attended, those from Russell Group universities were much more likely to say they felt their university had given them the skills they needed to get hired, with 73% selecting either tend to agree or strongly agree (see Figure 31). This figure was down, but still high, for graduates of Pre-1992 institutions (69%), and 63% for Post-1992 attendees, with just under a third disagreeing that their time at university had equipped them with these skills.

Figure 31: To what extent graduates felt university had given them employability skills, by university type



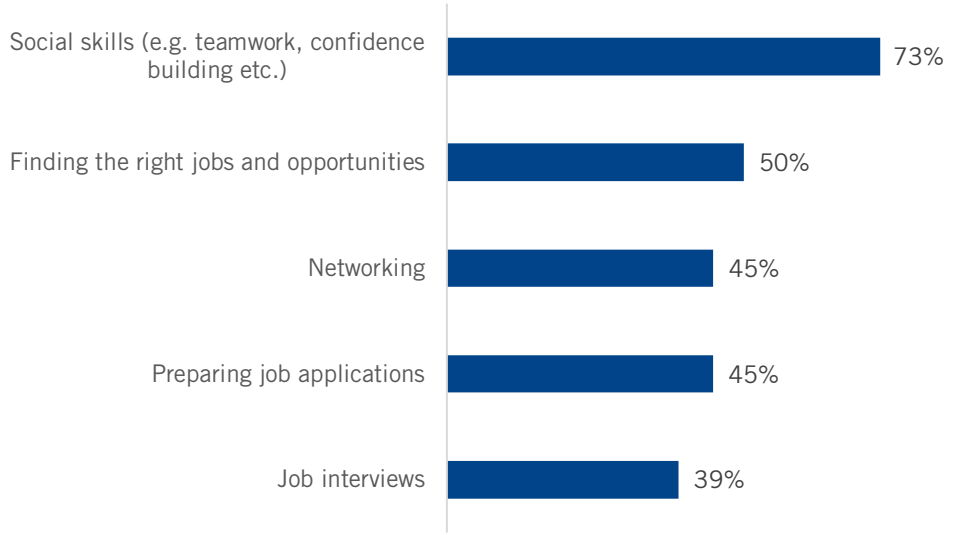
There were also differences between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds (Figure 32). Higher proportions of those from better-off backgrounds felt that university had helped to give them the skills to get hired in the types of jobs that they wanted post-graduation, and to perform well in those roles.

Figure 32: To what extent graduates felt university had given them employability skills, by socio-economic background



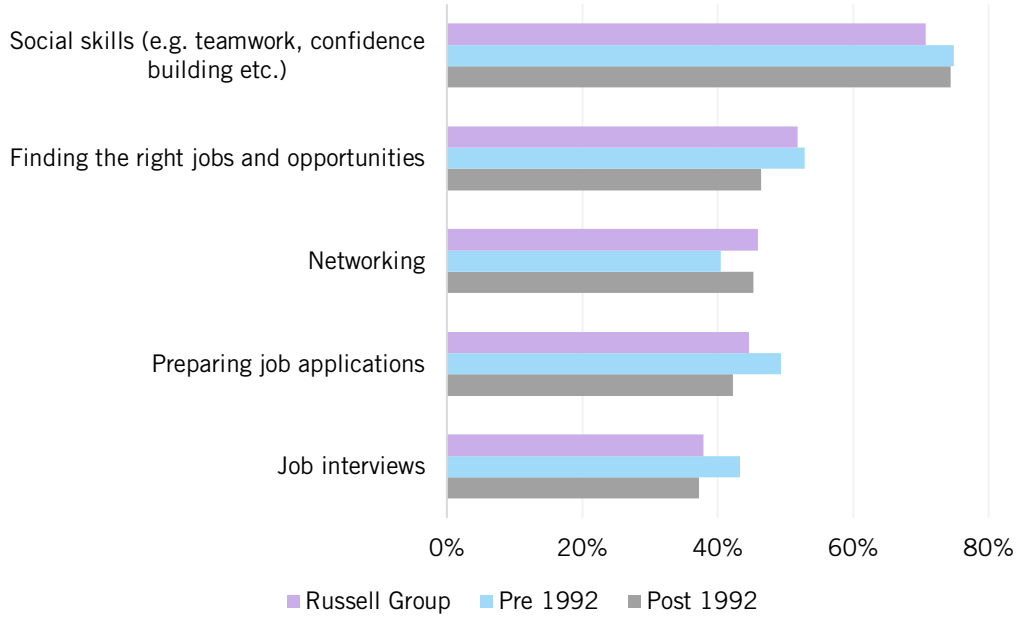
Graduates were also asked how sufficient any support had been to develop specific skills related employability, for example in developing the skills required for a job interview or a job application, or how well their social skills had been developed (Figure 33). The skill set graduates were the most positive about were social skills, with 25% saying their development had been very sufficient, and 48% fairly sufficient. Other skills were much further behind, with only 50% or less saying support from their university had been either very or fairly sufficient in developing their skills in finding the right jobs and opportunities, networking, preparing job applications or job interviews.

Figure 33: Whether support in the development of specific employability skills was sufficient



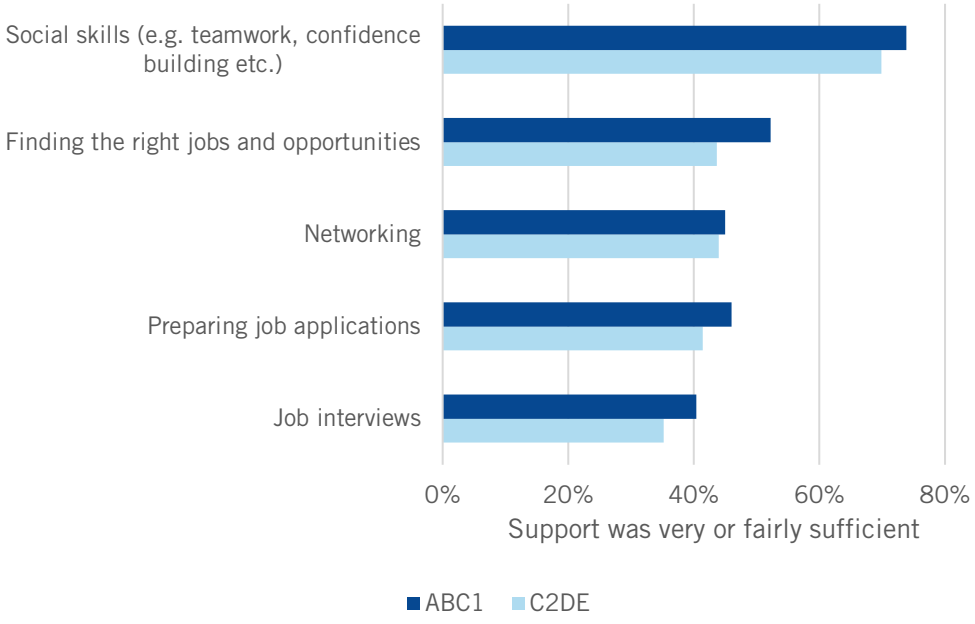
Looking at this provision broken down by university type, there were a few notable differences. Graduates from Pre-1992 institutions were the most positive that their university had sufficiently helped them to develop skills for preparing job applications (49%) and for job interviews (43%), compared to lower proportions in the RG (45% and 38%) and Post-1992s (42% and 37%) (see Figure 34). Students from Pre-1992 institutions were however the least positive about how sufficiently their universities had developed their networking skills (40% saying fairly or very sufficient, compared to 46% at Russell Group universities and 45% at Post-1992s). Graduates of Post-1992s had different concerns, with just 46% saying their universities had sufficiently given them the skills to find the right jobs and opportunities, compared to much higher proportions (53% and 52%) saying the same from Pre-1992s and RG universities.

Figure 34: Whether support in the development of specific employability skills was sufficient, by university attended



There were also differences between those from different socio-economic backgrounds (Figure 35). For example, while 52% of those from better-off backgrounds felt they had sufficiently developed skills in finding the right jobs and opportunities, a far lower proportion (44%) of their peers from poorer backgrounds said the same. Indeed, there were substantial gaps between graduates from higher and lower socio-economic groups for all of the skills included here, apart from the development of networking skills, where the two groups were broadly similar.

Figure 35: Whether support in the development of specific employability skills was sufficient, by socio-economic background



Two examples of employability support adapted for widening participation students, including those from low-income backgrounds, are outlined in the case studies below.

CASE STUDY 2 - Employability support for WP students at Lancaster University

Lancaster University runs two schemes targeted at groups of students likely to need additional support to help them into the workplace.

The 'Grow Your Futures' scheme is an opt-in support scheme designed to help students who are either in receipt of a Lancaster Bursary (open to any student who meets government criteria for financial support and those on household incomes of less than £30,000), the first in their family to attend university, are care-leavers or were young carers, are BAME, started their undergraduate degree after the age of 21, or who identify as disabled.

The scheme is designed to help students succeed in their careers beyond university and aims to allow recipients to access activities to develop their employability, as well as offering early access to financial support schemes for funding interviews, open days, and internships.

The scheme's benefits are mostly early access to careers opportunities and training provided by the university, including practice interviews and careers workshops. It also creates a community of students who might be facing unique challenges in accessing the workplace after they graduate.

Another facet of the programme is their 'Capital Connections', which gives students who are looking to work in either London or Manchester the opportunity to visit graduate employers, meet Lancaster graduates at a networking evening, and learn more about travelling and living in either city. This opportunity is only open to students on the Grow programme. The university covers all the travel and accommodation costs of the scheme.

Olivia, a student who took part, said that she "would whole-heartedly recommend the scheme to other students" as it gave her "the chance to practice applications, video interviews and networking, so that now [she] feels more than prepared for applying to graduate job schemes."

The university also runs a 'Future Leadership Experience' programme, which, while not exclusive to Grow students, also runs activities designed to support students to develop leadership and networking skills, as well as introducing them to several private, public and third sector employers. This programme is entirely free and is open to students who fit the Grow criteria, as well as students from military families, refugees and asylum seekers, estranged students and students from POLAR quintiles 2 and below.

The programme runs across three days, and includes activities like CV building workshops, networking opportunities and a visit to a local organisation, as well as meeting industry professionals from organisations like Barnardo's and companies like Virgin Transport and Centre Parcs.

The programme is designed to ensure that students start to think about their future career right from the beginning of university, and start developing their workplace skills and employability alongside this.

CASE STUDY 3 – Newcastle University Careers Insight Programme

Newcastle's Career Insights Programme is designed to help students from underrepresented backgrounds to gain experience and skills needed for work. The programme, which runs for one academic year, gives students access to a variety of free activities, placements and insights across five sectors - Business and Management, Marketing, Media & Arts, STEM, Public Sector and Law and Entrepreneurial Development.

The programme includes careers workshops, networking opportunities, employability skills workshops, a team-based consultancy project and access to employability skills workshops. Students who finish the programme receive a £200 budget to support employability activities, and the university's ncl+ award, an accredited qualification for extra-curricular activities which participants can put on their CVs. The scheme partners with a number of large employers, including the BBC, KPMG, Accenture, Teach First and GlaxoSmithKline.

The programme is open to students from several underrepresented groups, including those who have participated in certain widening participation schemes with the university, such as Realising Opportunities or the university's own PARTNERS programme. Students are also eligible who are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and who also attended a state school or college in the UK, as well as several other groups including mature students, care leavers and students with refugee status.

The university also offers a short summer school version of the programme, which features the same employers and eligibility criteria, and gives students the opportunity to participate in a team-based Sustainability Business Challenge, skills development workshops, online company insight visits and a practice recruitment process including an online interview, with feedback from an employer. The summer school also offers employer mentoring for students. As with the year long programme, all of the activities are free to participating students.

Meghan Burn, a Geography student who took part in the scheme and worked on a Northumbrian Water placement, said that "After completing this programme, I am now able to confidently speak to employers, search for graduate jobs and speak about myself and the skills I have in an interview. I am a lot more confident working with a group of people and I am able to share my ideas in front of an audience effectively."

The programme is designed to ensure that students start to think about their future career right from the beginning of university, and start developing their workplace skills and employability alongside this.

Provision in universities

This section looks at existing provision for life skills development and access for widening participation students at selective universities in the UK. To gather information on provision, information was taken from publicly accessible university websites, with findings sent to each university by email, and confirmed as correct by roughly half (18/29) of the institutions included here. The sample included the Russell Group as well as a further five highly ranked institutions.[42]

All universities that were examined had some form of careers webpage for their students, and every university advertised paid internships and work experience opportunities on those websites, with three quarters of the institutions organising the opportunities themselves. Just under three quarters appeared to offer work experience opportunities specifically for widening participation students. The opportunities often involved working with businesses in the local area; for example, the University of Leeds advertises paid internships and placements with local SMEs and charities, including Yorkshire Cancer Research and St Anne's Community Services; a service for homeless men,[43] whilst Glasgow offer roles with Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) on their online internships hub.[44] Other institutions, like Oxford and Bath, offer opportunities specifically for students that have been part of widening participation scholarship programmes, such as Oxford's Crankstart Scholarship for students from families with a household income below £27,500. Students on the scholarship can access support in identifying potential work experience placements and internships, as well as additional funding to support their participation.[45]

Funds to support students taking up such opportunities, such as an allowance for travel and office wear, were sometimes mentioned; for example, the University of Sheffield offer a tailored package of careers support, available for all students who are the first generation in their families to attend university, bursary recipients and/or from a WP background, called 'Discover Your Future', which includes access to an Employability Opportunities Fund to support skills development outside of work experience and placements.[46] This can be spent on subscriptions to services like LinkedIn Premium, training courses and conference tickets. Other universities had similar schemes, but these were sometimes exclusively attached to widening participation bursaries and so available to a narrower set of students.

All universities offered some form of support for CV writing, job interviews and similar activities through online courses, workshops and 1-1 appointments with career advisors. It was common to see bookable appointments available as well as drop-in services on university campuses. Additionally, universities typically organise careers fairs for students, with some tailored for specific subjects and sectors. The University of Southampton, for example, run a spring events programme (the latest edition of which took place over 2 weeks online) involving opportunities fairs and workshops with graduate employers.[47]

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[42] Other universities included outside of the Russell Group were Lancaster University, St Andrews University, the University of Sussex and the University of Bath.
[43] University of Leeds Careers Centre. Leeds Internship Programme. Available at: http://careerweb.leeds.ac.uk/leedsintern (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[44] University of Glasgow Careers Service. The Internship Hub. Available at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/careers/findingjobs/internships/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[45] University of Oxford. Crankstart Scholarships (formerly Moritz-Heyman). Available at: https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/student-life/help-with-the-cost/crankstart-scholarships (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[46] The University of Sheffield Careers Service. Discover your future. Available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/new/student/equality/dyf (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[47] University of Southampton Careers and Employability Service. Events and fairs. Available at: https://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/students/events-workshops-fairs/index.page (Accessed 19th February 2021)

However, research of graduates for this report found that over a third of graduates did not think their university helped with preparing for job applications and interviewing, implying that students may not always be aware of the resources available, access to services is limited and/or that they are not meeting all students' needs.

While all of the universities we looked at offered the opportunity to study abroad in at least some of their courses, just under a third appeared to not have ring-fenced funding to support WP students to be able to take up the opportunity. As we found that graduates from poorer backgrounds were more likely to say the costs were a key barrier to studying abroad, additional funding from universities could allow more disadvantaged students to enjoy and gain the life skills that come from studying abroad.

Several universities at the time of this work listed funding through the ERASMUS+ programme being available for WP students. However, the UK has recently announced it is leaving this programme and replacing it with the new Turing Scheme,[48] which is covered in more detail in the discussion. Other approaches include that of King's College London, who run Global Summer Experiences, internships for students that meet their WP criteria;[49] and the University of Liverpool who offer the Liverpool Go Abroad Grant (a means-tested cash bursary for studying abroad, which all eligible students receive), covered in more detail in case study 4 below.[50]

CASE STUDY 4: University of Liverpool – Study abroad funding for low-income students

The University of Liverpool has several schemes which provide additional funding for students from low-income backgrounds to study abroad.

The Liverpool Go Abroad Grant gives additional financial support to students not eligible for the Erasmus+ grant. The support is means tested, with more funding available to students from lower income backgrounds. Students with a household income of £25,000 and who meet the university's widening participation (WP) flag criteria can quality for a grant of £1,000, those with a household income at that level but who do not meet the university's WP criteria receive £750, students with a household income of between £25,001 and £35,000 receive £500 in funding. All other students receive £250.

In addition to the Go Abroad Grant, the university has a variety of other study abroad scholarships available which students can apply to, with some giving priority to low-income students. For example, the university has 40 Santander Scholarships available each year, worth £500, which while open to all students, prioritises those with a household income of £35,000 or less.

The university also has a fully funded summer abroad programme, open to students on a variety of different bursaries, including the Liverpool Bursary which is available to students from families with a household income below £35,000. During the programme all costs are covered, including flights, meals, accommodation and activities.

[48] The Turing Scheme. Widening access. Available at: https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/about/widening-access/ (accessed 19th February 2021)
[49] King's College London. Study at King's. Widening Participation Global Summer Experiences. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/abroad/discover/summer/widening-participation (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[50] University of Liverpool. Study Abroad. What funding is available? Available at: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/study-abroad/outbound/funding/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)

Almost all student unions in this set of universities offered incentives to get involved with extra-curricular activities and student societies. The most common way was giving out awards at student union ceremonies, recognising a range of achievements from sporting success to contribution to the local community. At the University of Sussex, the student union runs the Sussex Leaves Reward Scheme.[51] The scheme includes nine areas, called 'leaves' which represent awards in different areas, including inclusivity and communications, which can be awarded to student societies. They have been designed to encourage continual development within student-led groups at the institution. At St Andrews, honorary life membership is available for some societies for students who make an outstanding contribution.[52]

Around 90% of institutions also offered incentives like course credits and awards. For instance, Bristol offer the Bristol Plus award through their careers service, rewarding participation in extracurricular activities, and development of valuable employability skills.[53] Furthermore, several institutions, such as Cardiff, Imperial and St Andrews, offer employability awards which can be listed on the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) platform for employers to see.[54] They are awarded when students complete extracurricular activities, work experience programmes and other activities. An example of another scheme which aims to encourage participation, the Nottingham Advantage Award at the University of Nottingham, is covered in case study 5 below:

CASE STUDY 5 - The Nottingham Advantage Award

The Nottingham Advantage Award is a voluntary module open to students at the University of Nottingham to help improve their employability and prepare them for the world of work. It also encourages students to take part in activities beyond their course, and to engage with the wider university, and the wider community which they are a part of.

The award is open to all students, undergraduate and postgraduate, and consists of a variety of modules spread at different points across the academic year, from which students can pick a module which interests them the most, or which they feel will help them most with their chosen career path.

The modules range in topic from volunteering and careers workshops, to employer seminars and work placements. They can also range in length from a few weeks to a whole year. The award is granted as a qualification on a student's academic record and can also be contributed to by nearly all extra-curricular activities offered by the university.

The award offers assessments for student employability and progression, and students who take part in the award are encouraged to apply for internal prizes within the scheme, which mimic the recruitment process at some firms.

Finally, the scheme is associated with several top employers who run networking events, workshops, mock interviews, and sponsor prizes. These employers have previously included Teach First, PWC, Save the Children and Ernst and Young.

[51] Sussex Students Union. Sussex Leaves Reward Scheme. Available at: https://sussexstudent.com/sport-societies-media/information-for-committee-members/leaves-reward-scheme#:~:text=There%20are%209%20different%20leaves,led%20groups%20here%20at%20Sussex.&text=Your%20group%20will%20have%20to,points%20to%20achieve%20Gold%20Level (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[52] University of St Andrew's Students' Association. Your HLM. Available at: https://www.yourunion.net/about/awards/hlm/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[53] University of Bristol Careers Service. Bristol PLUS award. Available at: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/careers/bristol-plus-award/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[54] Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) (2015) About. Available at: http://www.hear.ac.uk/about (Accessed 19th February 2021)

A large number of providers (more than four in five) offered sandwich placements, although this was seen to vary by course type across each university; for instance, students at Cambridge can only study abroad if they are languages, law, engineering or physics students.[55] Completing a placement year provides a significant opportunity to develop employability skills; the University Of Sheffield recognises this by offering the opportunity to complete a placement year as part of their 'Degree with Employment Experience Programme'.[56] This is offered in a large proportion of their courses, such as Geography and Economics, and students gain the addition of 'with Employment Experience' to their degree title when they graduate.

However, a smaller proportion of institutions (62%) offered accredited modules to develop life and employability skills. That suggests there is room for growth in this provision, given research here found that 29% of graduates felt their university had not given them the skills they needed to get hired in the jobs they wanted after graduation. Universities with good provisions in this area include Newcastle, who offer a range of accredited careers modules focusing on entrepreneurship and enterprising,[57] as well as an accredited placement year; and Manchester, where students can take a module outside of their faculty to develop a particular skill to enhance their employment prospects.[58] Edinburgh also award academic credits for involvement in a professional development, internship, work experience or research project experience of a student's choosing completed during the summer vacation.[59]

Although it has since been discontinued, Queen Mary University of London previously ran a programme in which skill development was built into the undergraduate teaching programme for all students, as outlined in case study 6 below.

CASE STUDY 6 - Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) model

The QMUL Model was an accredited part of Queen Mary's undergraduate teaching programme. As a part of the programme, every student at the university had to take at least one module a year that specifically addressed versatility, networking, and helping to foster a global outlook in students. The model was integrated into teaching, meaning that students had to take part in these modules to pass the year. The modules accredited included volunteering, work placements and entrepreneurial experience, engagement with research projects, taught modules in disciplines distinct from a student's core programme, language learning and skills development modules.

Students could then track their progress against the three core themes though the Skills Review system, which gave them a record of their progression. Taking part in any of these programmes appeared as a credential on their academic record. The programme was designed to ensure that students started to think about their future career right from the beginning of university, and that they started to develop their workplace skills and employability alongside this.

[55] University of Cambridge International Student Office. ERASMUS+. Available at: https://www.iso.admin.cam.ac.uk/erasmus-plus (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[56] University of Sheffield Department of Geography. Degree with Employment Experience. Available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/geography/undergraduate/employment-experience#:~:text=A%20degree%20with%20Employment%20Experience%20includes%20a%20placement%20year%20in,your%20fourth%20and%20final%20year (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[57] Newcastle University Careers Service. Careers Modules. Available at: https://www.ncl.ac.uk/careers/modules/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[58] The University of Manchester. University College for Interdisciplinary Learning. Choosing your unit. Available at: http://www.college.manchester.ac.uk/aboutucil/choosingaunit/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)
[59] The University of Edinburgh. Making your summer count. Available at: https://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/make-summer-count/get-recognised (Accessed 19th February 2021)

Less than one in three of the institutions were seen to offer service learning, whereby students can take part in community activities like volunteering as part of their coursework, although this information was harder to find on university websites than the other areas covered here, so this may be an underestimate of available provision. This is relatively low, given there is evidence service learning can positively affect skills development,[60] particularly in leadership and critical thinking.[61] An example of service learning at the University of Glasgow is included in the following case study.

CASE STUDY 7 – Service Learning at Glasgow University

Glasgow University have built service-learning into their curriculum, as an accredited module in their Social and Public Policy Honours degree course. By embedding the opportunity within this course, the university ensures all students taking it have the chance to take up this type of experience during term time. Students taking part must pass a criminal background check, due to the type of work involved.

The service-learning module combines academic coursework with voluntary work within the community, which is designed to let students experience the impact of policy on practise. Options for voluntary work include providing care to those who are terminally ill in a hospice, or to frail and elderly residents in care home. Students can also volunteer to work with children and young people, (for example assisting in a school or nursery), help with women's issues (such as helping to run a library for and about women), help families facing disadvantage (including helping to distribute furniture), or working with disabled people (for example, helping to run recreational activities). Students are required to spend 8-week engagement in voluntary work in the community for 6 hours per week (which they must find themselves).

As well as this voluntary work, students also take part in two academic courses, Education for Citizenship and Active Citizenship. These courses consist of an essay, exam, peer review and co-assessed active participation, as well as the Active Citizenship assessment which includes a reflective journal (helping them to look back on their experiences while volunteering); a critical incident report and a co-assessed oral presentation.

Ellie Conway, a graduate of the programme, described it as "A unique, challenging and thoroughly rewarding experience…the opportunity to develop a more critical way of thinking".

Most of the institutions offering these modules only had modules in a small handful of their subjects. For instance, at the university of Warwick's Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL), a 'Community Engagement: Theory into Practice' module offers the opportunity to complete 30-40 hours of volunteering in a local non-profit organisation.[62] The University of Leeds is one institution that offers modules that can be taken across faculties; as part of their 'Broadening' programme, the 'Community Engagement Project' module involves undertaking a project based placement within a community organisation to develop a range of life skills including creative problem solving, independent working and professionalism.[63] While some programmes are at a relatively early stage, the National Centre for the Co-ordination of Public Engagement plays an overseeing role in the development of service learning.[64]

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[60] https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf

[61] AW Astin et al (2000) How service learning affects students. Higher Education paper 144. Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://en.wikipedia.org/&httpsredir=1&article=1145&context=slcehighered

[62] The University of Warwick. Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL). Undergraduate modules. Community Engagement: Theory into Practice (IL017) Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/study/ugmodules/communityengagement/ (Accessed 19th February 2021)

[63] Leeds for Life. Broadening: expand your academic horizons. About Broadening. Available at: https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/broadening#:~:text=Broadening%20develops%20skills%20and%20intellectual,and%20wider%20society%20after%20graduation. (Accessed 19th February 2021)

[64] National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Available at: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/

Discussion

With more graduates applying for jobs in an increasingly competitive marketplace, it is clear that a student's development of a wider set of employability skills, on top of their academic development, is vital. And as the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to bite, equipping students with the essential life skills that will allow them to flourish will be more important than ever. Findings in this report demonstrate that students core course alone does not help them to develop all of the skills employers are looking for, and that participation in a wide range of activities is needed for students to develop these skills. However, all too often, access to these activities is not equal for students from all socio-economic backgrounds.

Internships and work experience placements are vital stepping stones for many students into the world of work. However, findings here and in other Sutton Trust research[65] have shown that students from working class backgrounds are less able to access these opportunities, facing barriers finding placements and affording to take them up. Universities have an important role to play here, with many disadvantaged students who do take up internships finding them through their university's careers service. Universities should ensure paid internship opportunities are clearly advertised to students, that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are helped to engage with those services, and look at providing additional support (e.g., bursaries or grants) to this group of students to enable them to take up these opportunities. Careers services should also be aware of the barriers low-income students can face in accessing work experience, for example being unable to take time off from paid work, and engage with students to find potential solutions. Where possible and suitable to the course, universities should also look at building structured work experience opportunities into their courses (for example sandwich years, but this could also include activities such as service learning or employability modules), so that as many students as possible have a chance to gain this type of experience during their degrees. Support to find high quality, paid opportunities for work experience is likely to be more important than ever in the coming years, with evidence that the prevalence of unpaid internships rose following the 2008 recession,[66] there is a danger the same could happen as the UK recovers from the economic downturn following the pandemic.

Participation in student societies can also be important for developing students' employability and life skills. However, again, findings here and elsewhere show that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to take part in these activities. This disparity appears, at least in part, to be due to monetary barriers, such as the cost of activities and the need to work during term-time. Universities and student unions should look at providing funding to students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, to ensure cost is not a barrier for these activities. They should also make sure that students from all backgrounds can reap the potential benefits of these activities to their future employability and recognise that as many lower income students will be taking part in these activities for the first time at university, they may need additional support to help them to get involved.

Graduates from poorer backgrounds were also more likely to say they didn't take part because other members of the society made them feel unwelcome, and with previous research finding some working-class students did not take part in activities because they saw themselves as different from the type of

[65] C Cullinane & R Montacute (2018) Pay as you go? Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/

[66] E Holt-White & R Montacute (2020) COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact brief #5: Graduate Recruitment and Access to the Workplace. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Access-to-the-Workplace-Impact-Brief.pdf

people running them, for example due to their accents or their use of vocabulary.[67] A recent Guardian investigation found widespread evidence of classism at some of the UK's top universities,[68] which may be contributing to the issues covered in this report. Universities and student unions, particularly at institutions where disadvantaged students are significantly under-represented, should actively work to create environments which respect and promote diversity, including by socio-economic background. This should include taking strong action against any instances where such standards are not met, during both students' courses and in extra-curricular activities. Students at Post-1992 institutions were less likely to take part in student societies than those from the Russell Group, with students from poorer backgrounds much more likely to attend these universities than Russell Group institutions.[69] Efforts should be made to improve the provision of these extra-curricular activities at newer universities, with students attending them encouraged to take part.

There are also great challenges for students living from home while at university (who are themselves more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds),[70] who may be less able to take up opportunities built around the stereotypical university experience of campus living, with activities often taking part in the evening at university. While the pandemic has massively disrupted participation in extra-curricular activities this year (see our accompanying brief), it has at least meant that more of these activities have had to look at alternative forms of delivery, with an increase in online activities. After the pandemic, learnings from this time should be used to open up accessibility for students who may find it harder to take part in person on campus, including those living at home, as well as students with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities.

While undertaken by a relatively small proportion of students, there is evidence that studying abroad helps students to develop essential life skills and aids them in finding employment following graduation. However, again, students from working class backgrounds are less likely to take part in these opportunities. Some of the barriers for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds include cost, and not having travelled abroad much previously. Students from this group who did study abroad were more likely to do so closer to home in Europe, although it is not clear if this is a preference or a result of ERASMUS+ funding making opportunities in Europe more affordable than elsewhere.

The UK has recently announced that it is leaving ERASMUS+, and setting up a new study abroad programme, the Turing Scheme, [71] with a stated focus on providing opportunities for students from widening participation backgrounds. The focus on this group of young people is welcome, and this new scheme represents a huge opportunity for a step change in access to study abroad for disadvantaged students. The programme has so far promised to maintain parity with ERASMUS+ grant rates and student finance support, as well as providing additional financial support for disadvantaged students by reimbursing travel-related costs. The scheme also offers opportunities for short term mobility (from

[67] AM Bathmaker, N Ingram & R Waller (2013) Higher education, social class, and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34, 723-743. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ann_Marie_Bathmaker/publication/271932567_Higher_education_social_class_and_the_mobilisation_of_capitals_Recognising_and_playing_the_game/links/571481f808aeff315ba3602b/Higher-education-social-class-and-the-mobilisation-of-capitals-Recognising-and-playing-the-game.pdf?origin=publication_detail

[68] N Parveen (2020) UK's top universities urged to act on classism and accent prejudice. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/24/uk-top-universities-urged-act-classism-accent-prejudice

[69] UCL (2019) Disadvantaged students less likely to attend 'more selective' university courses. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2019/dec/disadvantaged-students-less-likely-attend-more-selective-university-courses#:~:text=High%20attaining%20disadvantaged%20students%20going,attend%20a%20Russell%20Group%20university.

[70] M Donnelly & S Gamsu (2018) Home & Away. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/home-and-away-student-mobility/

[71] The Turing Scheme. Widening access. Available at: https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/about/widening-access/ (accessed 19th February 2021)

4 weeks), opportunities likely to be more accessible for working class students who, when they do study abroad, are more likely to do shorter placements.[72]

To gain funding from the new Turing scheme, providers will be required to demonstrate how their project will support widening access. It is important that any projects which are funded are monitored and evaluated, and action taken if they are not opening up opportunities to lower income students. Given students from working class backgrounds are currently more likely to study abroad in Europe, the scheme should work to ensure a wide range of mobility opportunities are available, both closer to home and further afield globally, with additional funding available where needed for students travelling further away from the UK. The Department for Education and providers should work closely with disadvantaged young people to identify and act on any barriers to their participation in the scheme, and aim for rates of participation of lower income students to match that of their peers from better-off backgrounds.

Monetary barriers were found to be present for disadvantaged students for many of the activities examined in this report, from being unable to afford the costs of activities, to not having time to take part in activities because of paid work. Evidence from this report and elsewhere shows that many students from working class backgrounds are not able to take up the same opportunities at university that others enjoy because they cannot afford to. Where possible, universities should look to remove these cost barriers, but government should also look at increasing the amount of money students have available to live on while at university. The Trust have long advocated for the re-introduction of maintenance grants. However, government should also look at the total amount of maintenance available to such students, whether it is through grants or loans. A combination of grants and loans could help reduce financial strain for students while they are studying. By providing poorer students in England with more funding, the government could help to reduce the need for this group of students to work during term time to cover their living expenses, allowing them to take part more fully in the activities available at university, which this report has shown are vital to the development of students' wider employability and life skills.

Every student should have an equal chance to benefit fully from their time at university, not just from their academic course, but also from the wider set of activities on offer. Opening up these opportunities has huge potential to help disadvantaged young people to develop the essential life skills needed in the workplace, with long-term impacts on their chances for social mobility.

[72] UUK go international report 2019: Universities UK International (2019) Gone international: Rising aspirations. Report on the 2016-17 graduating cohort. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/Gone-Intl-2019.pdf?

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