Belonging, Connection and Community

Bristol SU

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Contents

Introduction

Feeling a meaningful sense of belonging, feeling connected to others, and feeling part of a community while at university are some of the most important factors contributing towards a positive student experience. These factors can influence a student's academic engagement and confidence, overall happiness and wellbeing, and likelihood to complete their studies.

However, for universities, creating a strong sense of community and belonging has become more difficult. The Covid-19 pandemic has made experiences of disconnection and disengagement more common among students. Although social restrictions have lifted, many of their impacts remain including an increase in online learning. In this context, questions around community and belonging have become particularly pertinent for Higher Education institutions.

Some Bristol-specific research on this subject has previously been conducted, but these projects were relatively small in scale. There have also been some larger projects on related topics which touch on this theme. These include Bristol SU's Rate My Group 2022 report, the University of Bristol Campus Experience Index 2022, and the University of Bristol Student Accommodation Project 2022. The findings from these research projects have been considered and are referenced throughout this report.

This piece of research was commissioned to harness a greater range and scale of student opinion and to provide robust evidence to inform the future actions of the University and Students' Union to support student communities and sense of belonging at Bristol.

Research Aims

The project aimed to explore which communities Bristol students feel like they most belong to, and what conditions these strong communities form and thrive under. It also aimed to examine the role of the University or SU in creating those conditions; what existing support has made a difference to students, and what further support would be helpful. Finally, it aimed to identify any 'gaps' in the University's approaches to community building – highlighting areas where students expect to find a strong sense of community but feel it is missing.

Methodology and Sample Overview

The research was designed as a mixed method study to allow for the collection of a robust and reliable dataset that was representative of students' views, but which would also capture the individual experiences of students navigating their sense of belonging and personal connections.

Each stage of the project fed into the design of the next method, and student co-production was central to the design.

The project began with a set of workshops with student leaders to identify key issues and explore student understanding of the subject area. These workshops were used to design the online

survey. Thematic analysis of the survey data then fed into the design of a series of semi-structured focus groups which were used to explore certain topics further and hear more from specific demographics. Wherever possible, identity-based focus groups were led by trained student facilitators who were members of that identity group.

Research sample size at a glance:

- **12** workshop consultants
- **1344** survey respondents
- **63** focus group participants in **12** semi-structured focus groups

Broadly, this research was representative of the student population with slight over and underrepresentation from some groups. This means that the views heard are inclusive of the entire student population, and the conclusions drawn are likely to be relevant to University of Bristol students.

The full methodology, further information on sample and representativeness, and details of ethics and safeguarding can be found in Appendix A.

Terminology

This report acknowledges the futility of the term 'BAME' and only uses this acronym when speaking generically about the experiences of students from ethnic minorities. In the survey, an extended answer list, which included the option to alternatively write a response, was used when asking the respondent how they defined their ethnicity.

Executive Summary

Throughout the research, it was clear that a student's experiences of community and belonging at the University of Bristol varies greatly depending on their level and programme of study, accommodation, fee status, and liberation group (if they are part of one). There are pockets of strong communities and good practice at Bristol, but these are not experienced equally by all, with some students facing more structural barriers than others. One universal finding, however, is that Bristol students want and expect to have a good sense of community with those on their programme of study but in many cases this expectation is not being met.

The varied experiences of Bristol students indicate that approaches to and support for community building must also be varied and inclusive. However, the research did also find that there are some more generalizable conditions in which strong connections are more likely to form. Some of these conditions include:

- Dedicated time to interact, with the same people on a recurring basis
- Opportunities to interact, especially as part of a pair or small group
- Having a reason to interact (such as a shared activity or purpose which encourages interaction)
- Spaces to interact and be around each other
- Low or no cost to access activities or opportunities to interact
- Clear and accessible communication of the activities, opportunities, and spaces on offer

In practice, some positive examples students gave us which led to strong connections for them included: volunteering with the same group of people every week, working regularly with others on academic group work, and chatting to other students each week at the Global Lounge's language café. Instances of activities that did not work so well included a one-off, large, formal dinner where no-one knew each other or had much reason to speak, a society dance class where students danced individually and then left immediately afterwards, and a large course WhatsApp group chat with 320 people where students only felt comfortable asking academic questions.

Broadly speaking, then, the role of the University or the SU is to create these positive conditions for students. In most cases, this should involve facilitating or supporting these more natural interactions and allowing students to proceed organically from there. However, varied approaches to community building should still be maintained as different activities work for different students. In particular, the SU and University should focus their efforts on provisions for the demographic groups who feel less of a sense of belonging and are less satisfied with their social connections.

Please note that the 'areas for action' outlined in this report are quite broad. Further work will be carried out with SU and University teams to develop these into more specific recommendations with clear, actionable points.

Key Findings and Areas for Action

Overview

- Overall, the university is a welcoming place, with 4 out of 5 students telling us it was 'very welcoming', or 'more welcoming than not'

- Most students said that they made their strongest friendships through non-elective communities (such as their course or accommodation), but elective communities (such as student groups) play a key role for a significant proportion of students, too

- Looking at opportunities to connect with others in relation to their course, accommodation, or through extra-curricular groups – students responded that opportunities to be part of a community around their programme of study fell short of their expectations the most

- Students felt that communities were closed to them outside of the welcome period, and that they had missed out on opportunities if arriving later

- Students are generally satisfied with their social lives, although experiences fell short of the expectations they had before starting

- Students frequently look to societies, sports clubs, and volunteering projects as their preferred approach to meeting like-minded people

- 48% of students felt outside of what they perceive to be the 'mainstream culture' of the university, which was most commonly identified as being drinking and party-orientated, as well as upper and middle class or 'posh'

- Disabled students, students with caring responsibilities, and trans students are among those who expressed feeling the poorest sense of belonging to the University

- Disabled students, BAME students, international students and state school educated students were all less satisfied with the number and quality of their social connections at the University than the overall results

- 1 out of 10 of respondents said that they did not feel connected to anyone at the university

- Among both PGTs and PGRs, 1 out of 5 of respondents said that they did not feel connected to anyone at the university

- When asked if they had someone they could rely on for support, 28% of students said this was the case 'rarely' or 'not much of the time'

Academic studies and course-based community

Key findings

- Students' academic circles are important sources of community. 'Programme, school or faculty' was the second most common answer to how students knew the person/people they were most connected to, with this being the case for 45% of respondents.

- Meanwhile, 78% of respondents said they feel a sense, or somewhat of a sense, of community with those on their programme of study, although there were significant variances in the sense of community across different schools.

- When asked to 'rate' their expectations and reality of key areas of their social life, the greatest difference between expectations and reality was with 'friendships with those on your programme'.

- Within the survey, online and hybrid learning was the most cited obstacle to socialising with course mates. This was reiterated in the focus groups, but these discussions also showed that for some students (with disabilities or who were shielding) online teaching had a positive impact on their overall experience.

- A lack of opportunities to socialise was the second most cited obstacle to connecting with their course mates, with students wanting opportunities to socialise with classmates within the weekly timetable of their course. Dedicated time and space were identified as practical barriers.

- Groupwork or paired work can enable students to make connections, and peer mentoring, 'family' or 'buddy' schemes within courses were received positively, with students feeding back that they were reassured by having at least one social contact relevant to their subject when they arrive at the university.

- PGTs and PGRs are at greater risk of social isolation than UGs and require more tailored support. Both groups wanted more subject-based connections, and PGRs also wanted more opportunities to network with academic staff.

Areas for Action

1. Schools and programmes should explore how to build opportunities for students to meet, socialise and network into or amongst the learning timetable and incorporated within teaching methods/pedagogy.
2. For many students, online learning is seen as a barrier for making connections, but for others it is seen as a vital provision to help them remain connected. Staff should have an understanding of the advantages and limitations of different modes of teaching in terms of opportunity for interpersonal connections, and should consider barriers to, and maximise opportunities for, students to interact meaningfully with others amidst their learning.

Extra-curricular activities

<u>Key findings</u>

- 80% of survey respondents said it was 'very' or 'quite' important to meet students with the same interests or hobbies as themselves, however some identity groups reported finding this more challenging than others, such as those with caring responsibilities, disabled students and students over the age of 22.

- Students primarily sought to meet other like-minded students through societies/student groups, with more than a third adopting this approach.

- A common theme from the focus groups was a desire for events, activities, and other engagement opportunities to be available and accessible year-round. Participants frequently demonstrated the perception that if you didn't get involved during Welcome Week you had missed your chance – this particularly impacted students whose courses did not start in September and international students who had experienced delays coming to Bristol.

- Holiday periods were identified as higher risk for isolation because of a reduced offer of events and other engagement opportunities.

- When asked, what do you think the mainstream culture of UoB is, Nightlife or partying was the most common theme. This included responses such as 'clubbing' 'going out' and 'parties'. 'Drinking' was also a very common theme, as well as 'drugs'. Focus group participants commonly expressed a desire for more non-drinking-based events.

- Students regularly discussed their successful connections formed through volunteering and referenced the Global Lounge as providing the opportunity to create connections.

- Not knowing about events and opportunities was another regular theme in the focus groups. This issue was discussed most by international, mature and first year students.

- Another commonly identified barrier to participation in events and groups was cost, including 'hidden costs'.

<u>Areas for Action</u>

1. Extra-Curricular activity organisers, whether students or staff, should support entry/access throughout the year, not just at select designated points. They should consider and plan for the experience of students joining later in the year.
2. Extra-Curricular activity organisers should consider how to use communications to counter-act the perception that students have 'missed the boat' if they don't participate in 'Welcome' activities.

3. Any programme of events and activities running over holiday periods needs to be promoted effectively, and where possible, students should also be supported to self-organise.

Accommodation

Key findings

- Throughout the research, making friends through shared accommodation emerged as the most common way in which students form strong connections with one another, with this being the case for nearly half (49%) of respondents.

- 89% of respondents said that they get on either 'very well' or 'quite well' with their house or flatmates, these results were similar across UoB allocated accommodation, private halls in Bristol, and private sector rental accommodation.

- In university-allocated accommodation, community building is working well for most students. However, different halls of residences scored differently for student satisfaction with the friendships they made in their accommodation. Social spaces in halls seem to correlate to greater senses of belonging and satisfaction with that accommodation.

- Students living further from campus (both in University and private accommodation) were more likely to feel disconnected and excluded.

Areas for Action

1. Using this, and other recent research, further explore the disparities in student connection and communities in different halls of residence, with a view to permeating best practice and levelling up halls with the lowest ratings.
2. Look at specific interventions and support for students in private accommodation and/or those living far from campus, ensuring that they can participate in existing activities as well as having the means to self-organise.

Campus Spaces

Key Findings

- It was clear from the focus groups that campus social spaces are important settings for facilitating and maintaining social connections. Participants had lots of positive feedback for places such as Senate House, Royal Fort Gardens and 'hubs' allocated to specific courses.

- Students reported a range of issues around accessing university spaces, including availability (busy-ness at peak times and/or restricted opening times), associated costs, and not knowing the spaces they could use/what they could use them for.

- When asked what changes students would like to see, the most popular responses were; "live" information about space availability, extended opening hours, and having the option to bring (and heat) their own food and drinks.

Areas for Action

1. Maximise access to existing spaces on campus for students to connect and socialise, and reduce barriers where possible (lowering or removing costs, increasing opening times, clearly communicating availability, and making clear the purpose of those spaces)
2. Consider increasing the number of spaces made available for student use and activity across the estate, but with a focus on space in schools/departments and accommodation.

Identity and inclusion

Key findings

- Different identity groups reported varying experiences and challenges related to sense of belonging, making connections, and participating in university communities.

- The average sense of belonging at the University, in Bristol, and in the UK, was good. Disabled students, trans students and students with caring responsibilities expressed the poorest sense of belonging to the University. BAME students, EU students, and students aged 22+ also experience a 'sense of belonging gap.' International students expressed a strong sense of belonging to the University, but not to Bristol or the UK.

- Disabled students reported finding the university less welcoming than other groups, with 24% feeling the university was 'not very' or 'not welcoming', compared to 15% of students without a disability. Disabled students raised issues that sometimes prohibited them engaging with their studies, extracurricular activities, and their accommodation including physical inaccessibility of spaces/activities, required adjustments not being met, and feeling excluded as a result of the University and SU's response to the pandemic.

- Of all survey respondents, 46% said that it was 'quite' or 'very' important for them to meet students from a similar background or liberation group: when examining BAME-identifying students' responses specifically, this figure rises to 59%.

- In a focus group for BAME students, some expressed that they felt pre-entry information and experiences (such a summer schools) could lead to a misrepresentation of the ethnic make up for the university and city.

- One of the most prevalent themes coming out of discussions with international students was an unwanted disconnect with home students. Reasons for this included shyness, language, and cultural barriers, although none universally.

- Class was a prevalent theme to emerge from both the survey and focus groups. When asked what they thought the mainstream culture of the university is, 'upper/-middle class' emerged as the second most common theme. In discussion with working-class identifying participants, students shared examples of class-based microaggressions or reminders of cultural differences, feeling outside of an exclusive network, and how this hindered their sense of belonging and the quality of connections they formed.

Areas for Action

1. Initiatives that cater for those with the lowest sense of belonging should be enhanced and upscaled, and anything open to the whole student body needs to consider and cater for all identity group needs
2. Post pandemic recovery must ensure disabled students and/or students who are shielding do not miss out on the opportunity to participate in university communities

Communications

Key Findings

- Communication was central to much of the discussion from students around how they had developed (or tried to develop) a sense of belonging, community, and connectedness during their time at the university.

- Students, and especially international students, are using social media to connect with people before they arrive, particularly WhatsApp groups. Further support to set up these online groups and make them widely accessibly would be broadly appreciated.

- Students appreciated the pre-enrolment and promotional communications from the university, but students felt that the sense of belonging created by these communications was not maintained by messages received once they were on their courses.

- Student commonly voiced that they receive too many emails from too many accounts once they have started. This results in confusion and emails going unread.

Areas for Action

1. Recognise that students feel overwhelmed by the number of emails they receive, and consider this in the promotion of opportunities, finding other ways to spread the information.
2. Institutional communications planners should consider we are re-enforcing student perceptions of the mainstream culture of the university in an unhelpful way.

Academic studies and course-based community

The research indicates that students' academic circles are important existing and potential sources of community.

When students were asked about their sense of belonging and how they had built a community during their time at the University, many mentioned their course. 'Programme, school or faculty' was the second most common answer to how students knew the person or people they felt most connected to, with this being the case for 45% of respondents. Additionally, 78% of all survey respondents said they feel a sense, or somewhat of a sense, of community with those on their programme of study and it was evident within the focus groups that the majority of students had formed some connections on their course.

However, this sense of community varied greatly between different schools and when asked to 'rate' their expectations and the reality of key areas of their social life, the greatest difference between expectations and reality was with 'friendships with those on your programme'.

"I expected my course to be a bit more chatty and social"

It is clear that not all students get the same opportunity to develop successful connections with those on their course, and that more could be done to maximise opportunities for connection and friendship.

Additionally, Postgraduate Taught students and Postgraduate Researchers each have their own unique sets of needs when it comes to academic community building.

Making course-based connections: obstacles

In the survey, students were asked if anything gets in the way of them socialising with their course mates. 917 students answered this open text question. The most common obstacles cited were classes being online or hybrid/blended learning (124 responses), a general lack of opportunities to socialise with their cohort (73 responses) and pandemic restrictions (from current and previous years) having a lasting impact on social bonds (70 responses).

Regarding online and hybrid/blended learning, many students in the focus group discussions spoke about the negative effect of online learning upon social interactions and suggested that a move back to face-to-face teaching might mediate this.

However, while online learning was seen as one of the main challenges to developing friendships with classmates for many, for some students it was clear that elements of online learning were invaluable as a tool for inclusive learning and course socialising. For students that require or choose to shield or have a disability and are unable to access the campus due to its inaccessibility, the continuation of online provision is vital to not only allow students to access their course, but also to form meaningful connections with their course mates.

Even where lectures had been conducted in person, many students mentioned that limited contact time, or lectures or seminars that did not include an opportunity to talk to peers, meant that they had not really had a chance to form strong bonds with people in their cohort. This was especially the case for postgraduate and joint honours students, many of whom had different people in each lecture or seminar they attended.

A general lack of opportunities to socialise with their cohort was linked to a variety of reasons including few contact hours, students leaving immediately after classes, differing timetables, a lack of organised events and large cohort sizes.

Pandemic restrictions, and the lasting effect of restrictions, was also evident through the focus groups discussions as a key barrier to forming communities. Many students spoke of their cohort turning up for classes then leaving immediately afterwards, and the online learning during lockdown preventing community-building in cohorts.

"Because of Covid-19, I had very limited offline courses (modules); I had no chance to meet all of my classmates"

The pandemic's lasting affect has impacted how easily students socialise, and the ways in which they do:

"We've got the opportunities. It's just, whether people are ready to be social again and after spending more than a year inside, those kind of social skills and that resilience is really difficult to get back"

The above findings suggest that a return to in-person teaching alone will likely not counter all of the barriers students identified to making friends on their courses. It is likely that students will require additional support, and structures or opportunities designed to facilitate them making connections, to build strong academic and course-based communities.

Additionally, international students may also require further tailored support. Many international students who took part in the research felt they would have benefitted from more time in lectures to talk to peers and break down their initial anxiety at being in a new country. International students largely expressed an interest in connecting with home students, that being one of the reasons they chose to study abroad but felt that they had not always had the opportunity to do this.

Making course-based connections: what works

A clear theme across both the focus groups and survey responses was that many students had made friendships with classmates. Where strong connections had been made, students talked about getting to know classmates through WhatsApp groups (set up by students); regular academic socials; through paired and group activities within class and for assignments; and through schemes set up within Departments to support new students to connect with course peers in later years of study.

It was clear that having more dedicated time and space to meet with classmates regularly was a strong desire from students. When it came to academic social events being organised, focus group discussions indicated that many students preferred events that were regular, informal, offered food or non-alcoholic drinks and were school or department supported or instigated.

"My department regularly arranges social meetups: every Tuesday… we all gather together to have tea. That is why I was able to build connections with them. But if those social meetups were not being arranged by my faculty, then I might have not been able to develop those connections."

It was evident that students appreciate the opportunity to talk to peers on their course, especially in the early part of the academic year. Building paired or group working into learning sessions (not necessarily assessed work) was praised as a means to forming these connections (this was mentioned as working really well in the Graduate School of Education).

Having scheduled time before or after lectures, seminars and workshops, in which students could work together would also be beneficial, even when sessions are online. Students also wanted opportunities to socialise with classmates within the weekly timetable of their course.

Additionally, those students who had had the opportunity to be part of a 'buddy' or 'family scheme' within their department were overwhelmingly positive about the experience and had made strong friendships as a result.[1]

In discussing why they thought such schemes were beneficial, students said they really liked that something had been set up for them prior to arrival and talked of the relief of knowing they would come to university and have 'at least one friend'. Another positive discussed was that the connection was course-specific, meaning it was someone who would understand their individual experience, would know about their modules and assignments, and know how to seek support. In sessions where individuals talked about these schemes, the other students in the focus groups who had not been offered these opportunities expressed that they would have appreciated a similar form of support.

Postgraduate needs and concerns

It is important to acknowledge that Postgraduate Taught students and Postgraduate Researchers each have their own unique sets of needs when it comes to academic community building and encounter different challenges to Undergraduates. Both groups expressed a lower overall sense of belonging to the University and were more likely to be socially isolated than Undergraduates.

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[1] 'Family' schemes are schemes designed to build communities on academic courses and are usually set up by academic societies. Each 'family' is made up of two intermediate or final year students who are the 'parents' and two or three first year students who are assigned as their 'children'. The 'parents' can act as course mentors for the 'children', and the 'family' also meets up regularly for social events.

Academic based connections are especially important for these groups, and they require community building activities which are tailored to their specific needs.

Postgraduate Taught Students

Of the 154 PGTs who answered the survey, 51% said that the person or people they felt most connected to at the University was from their 'programme, school or faculty'. This was followed by 'in the same accommodation as you' (28%). 'I don't feel very connected to anyone here' was the fifth most common answer (18%).

When asked how much they feel like they belong at the University, where 0 is 'I don't belong' and 10 is 'I fully belong', the average score for PGTs was 6.49. This is lower than the UG score of 6.74.

78% of PGTs find the University to be a welcoming place, lower than the UG score of 84%.

In the focus groups, the majority of PGT participants expressed a strong desire to have more or better connections on their programme of study. They explained that this provided a valuable support network for dealing with a heavy academic workload.

Online learning and a lack of repeated interaction with course mates were again cited as barriers. There was also a sense that most student groups and events are geared towards UGs, which is off-putting for PGTs.

Suggested improvements included having more PGT-specific events (such as a PGT-specific welcome fair), low stakes academic group work, course mate mingles at the start of the year, and regular, informal, course-based events.

"…a more tailored, postgrad, casual environment … would be a lot more helpful. At the same time, you could also possibly push for the individual schools to do more."

Postgraduate Researchers

Of the 107 PGRs who answered the survey, 68% said that the person or people they felt most connected to at the University was from their 'programme, school or faculty'. This was followed by 'an academic staff member' (33%), and then 'I don't feel very connected to anyone here' (20%).

When asked how much they feel like they belong at the University, where 0 is 'I don't belong' and 10 is 'I fully belong', the average score for PGRs was 5.54. This is lower than the UG score of 6.74, and the PGT score of 6.49.

69% of PGRs find the University to be a welcoming place, lower than the UG score of 84%, and the PGT score of 78%.

PGRs emphasized a desire to form communities on the basis of networking and building work or subject-specific connections and sought connections with those who shared their professional aims and goals.

Like PGTs, PGRs said that smaller groupings were the ideal conditions within which to community build, and advocated against generic, large scale academic grouping.

"During the pandemic they started doing this thing called PGR Circles… connecting PGRs together in a smaller group. And I think those are great opportunities to meet people"

They also talked of wanting time to connect with their lecturers outside of lectures, to talk about the sector that they are pursuing a career in or discuss research ideas.

'It's not just because I want to make friends, or I want to have fun, or whatnot. It's also professional networking. That experience to learn to be around academics. It's extremely important for us. So, what would really, really help if somehow the Department could take responsibility for that part of our development as well, not just the research itself'

PGRs also spoke of being particularly time-poor due to the demands of their research, employment, or other commitments. For this reason, many felt that networking opportunities being built into their learning time would be of benefit to their wellbeing and professional development. They also suggested running PGR social events at a range of times and locations (and having online and in person options) to offer more flexibility.

The importance of inclusive environments and course-based activities

The survey included several markers to assess course inclusivity and students' sense of belonging in their courses. As shown below, 82% of respondents said that the content of their programme was either 'very' or 'quite' sensitive to all cultural identities, however this was not the case for all students. 18% said that 'there is room for lots of improvement' or that their course is 'not at all sensitive'.

Do you feel that the content of your programme, and how it is delivered, is sensitive to all cultural identities? (n = 1,167)
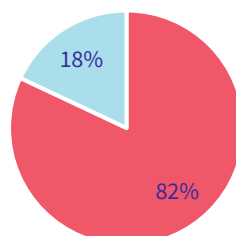
- very' or 'quite' sensitive to cultural identies
- there is room for improvement' or 'not at all sensitive'

Meanwhile, in their learning environments, 8% of all respondents said that their teachers ensure that seminars, lectures or laboratories are a safe and respectful space 'not much of the time' or 'rarely'. When considering these markers of a lack of inclusivity and poor sense of belonging, respondents who were taking STEM subjects were overrepresented.

This theme of inconsistent inclusivity also arose in the focus groups in discussion of academic and course-based events. Students living further from campus, and students with additional responsibilities such as caring responsibilities or paid work commitments find it harder to attend such events and so might miss opportunities to form connections. As discussed in other sections of this report, course-based events that revolved around drinking were also felt to be exclusionary to some students. This illustrates that the range of student beliefs preferences and lifestyles should be considered when planning these course-based activities.

"I have found the drinking culture is quite exclusionary. There's quite a lot of students [who] don't want to go to the pub. And if social stuff is only ever held there, there's just a group of people that will never be included"

Areas for Action

1. Schools and programmes should explore how to build opportunities for students to meet, socialise and network into or amongst the learning timetable and incorporated within teaching methods/pedagogy.
2. For many students, online learning is seen as a barrier for making connections, but for others it is seen as a vital provision to help the remain connected. Staff should have an understanding of the advantages and limitations of different modes of teaching in terms of opportunity for interpersonal connections, and should consider barriers to, and maximise opportunities for, students to interact meaningfully with others amidst their learning.

Extracurricular activities

Across the research project, students reported that it was important for them to meet others with similar interests and/or values to them. Joining student groups was found to be the most common way in which students try to meet other, like-minded people. In the focus groups, many students explained how they had made good friends through extra-curricular activities. However, it was also clear that accessing and getting the most out of these activities was easier for some students than others due to a range of existing or perceived barriers.

The importance of meeting other like-minded students

Findings from the survey indicate that meeting others with similar interests and values is important to Bristol students.

88% of survey respondents said it was 'quite' or 'very' important to meet students with the same values and worldview as themselves, whilst 80% of survey respondents said it was 'quite' or 'very' important to meet students with the same interests and hobbies as themselves.

51% of respondents said it was 'quite' or 'very' important to meet students from a similar background or liberation group/s as themselves, but this percentage was much higher among certain demographic groups. These figures are discussed in more detail in the 'Identity and Inclusion' section.

Participating in extra-curricular activities emerged as the main way in which students actively go about trying to form these types of connections. Students were asked how they try to meet other, like-minded students in an open text question which received 870 responses, and through 'societies' was by far the most common answer (359 responses or 41%).

What's working well

It is also clear from the research findings that these attempts to build friendships through extra-curricular activities are working very well for a significant proportion of students.

When asked to consider the person or people they felt most connected to at Bristol, 37% of survey respondents said it was a person or people they met through a society, sports club or another organised group. This was the third most selected category, after 'from my accommodation' (49%) and 'from my programme, school or faculty' (45%).

In the focus groups, many students described how they had made friends through extra-curricular activities. For the most part, students who had made good friends in this way were quite heavily involved in their chosen activity. Some examples given included making friends through being on a society committee, playing rugby socially, being a member of an orchestra, or through volunteering at the Global Lounge. These students were very grateful to the SU or Global Lounge for providing the physical space, time, and structures which enabled them to meet and become close with their friends.

> *"It was to do with having to share these physical spaces. You know, because you're running a society, you're running events, so you're bound to spend a lot of time together"*

Some students also reported making friends through attending one-off events organized either by a society or by the SU (for example, a clothes swap event or a board games evening) although this was less common.
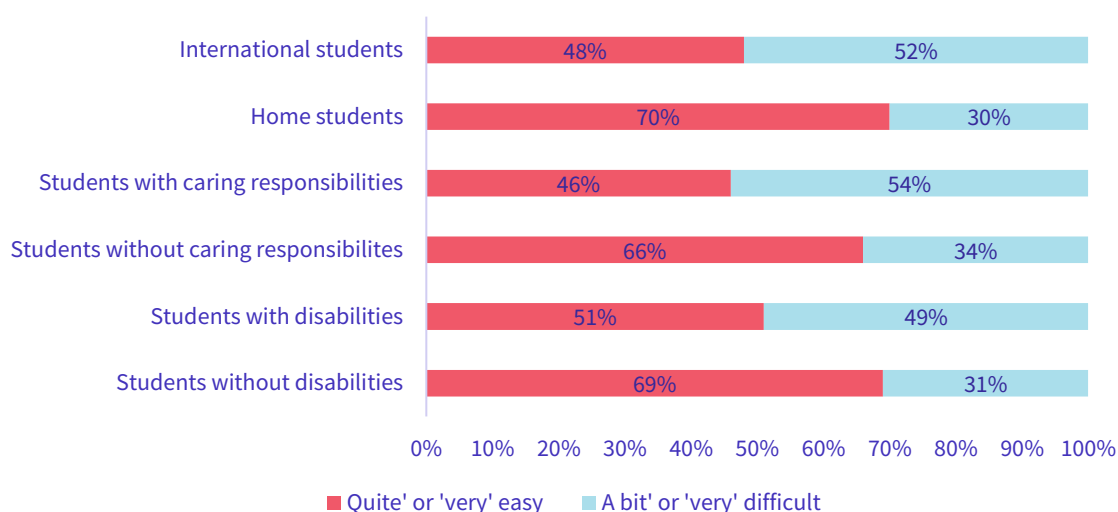
> *"There's also just some people I randomly met at one event, we ended up talking for the rest of the night and randomly ended up staying friends."*

Variation between demographic groups

While the current extra-curricular offer works well for many students, the survey also uncovered that there are disparities between different demographic groups in accessing and enjoying these activities. Given how important it is for students to meet likeminded people and how valuable student groups and activities can be as a method of doing this, these figures should be carefully considered.

Respondents were asked how easy or difficult they found it to meet other students with the same **values and worldview** as themselves. Some demographic groups had a particularly high proportion of students saying they found it 'a bit' or 'very' difficult to do this. These groups are shown below, alongside their comparator groups to highlight the disparity.

How easy do you find it to meet other students with the same **values and worldview** as you? (n = 1,206)

Group	Quite' or 'very' easy	A bit' or 'very' difficult
International students	48%	52%
Home students	70%	30%
Students with caring responsibilities	46%	54%
Students without caring responsibilites	66%	34%
Students with disabilities	51%	49%
Students without disabilities	69%	31%

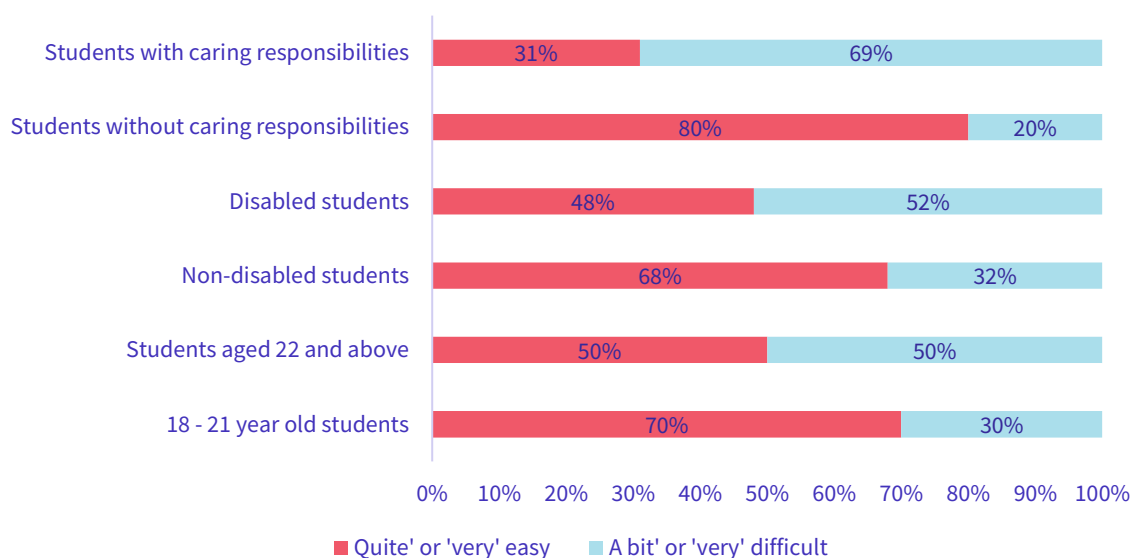■ Quite' or 'very' easy   ■ A bit' or 'very' difficult

Students were also asked how easy or difficult they found it to meet other students with the same **interests and hobbies** as themselves. Again, some demographic groups had a particularly high proportion of students saying they found it 'a bit' or 'very' difficult to do this. These are shown below, alongside their comparator groups.

How easy do you find it to meet other students with the same **interests and hobbies** as you? (n = 1,201)

Category	Quite' or 'very' easy	A bit' or 'very' difficult
Students with caring responsibilities	31%	69%
Students without caring responsibilities	80%	20%
Disabled students	48%	52%
Non-disabled students	68%	32%
Students aged 22 and above	50%	50%
18 - 21 year old students	70%	30%

■ Quite' or 'very' easy   ■ A bit' or 'very' difficult

Some of these disparities could be partly due to some of the more general barriers to accessing student groups and activities discussed by students in the focus groups. These are explored in the sections below.

For disabled students and international students, some of the reasons for these disparities are discussed further in the 'Identity and Inclusion' section.

Barriers to student groups: joining 'late'

During the focus group discussions, there were many instances where students described wanting to be involved in a group and make social connections but felt that they were not able to due to certain obstacles. One of the most frequently mentioned of these was the time of year at which students joined a group. Among many focus group participants there was a perception that most student group events happen at the start of the academic year. They felt that if they did not join a group at this time, the group became socially closed off and difficult to integrate into.

Reasons for joining late included a lack of awareness of the importance of signing up early or studying a course that started part-way through the academic year. International students in several focus groups also mentioned delays to their intended start date (caused by travel, isolation periods and visa difficulties) as factors that prevented them from joining student groups during the initial 'Welcome' period.

"It feels like if you don't join a society within the first week or two, you can't join... It's just hard introducing yourself to a group that's already so well formed"

Barriers to student groups and events: drinking culture

Another barrier to accessing student groups mentioned by focus group participants was the drinking culture at the University and the divide this creates between students who do and do not drink alcohol. This theme was prevalent across many aspects of the research and is also discussed in the 'Academic Studies' section.

The perception of drinking as the 'norm' at the University came across strongly in the survey results. Students were asked 'what do you think the mainstream culture of the University of Bristol is?' in an open text question which received 846 responses. 'Nightlife and Partying' was the most common theme (175 responses or 21% of respondent answers). 'Drinking' was also a very common theme, as well as 'drugs' (71 and 54 responses).

"I think there's a divide between party students and study students if that makes sense. It's pretty stark. I keep myself to myself and do my work usually…"

Many focus group participants who were not interested in drinking (of which there was a significant proportion) said that they didn't feel like particular events or whole student groups were 'for them' due to the lack of alcohol-free activities, leading to feelings of exclusion.

"I feel like a lot of the events organized by the university are mostly like, alcohol-based. So in that way a lot of friends of mine who don't really drink and myself as well, are not really keen to be part of it."

Suggested improvements

Focus group participants suggested various improvements that the SU or University could implement to make extra-curricular activities more accessible and inclusive, or better environments for making connections.

One common suggestion was increasing the frequency of events and having more events beyond the Welcome Period, allowing students more opportunities to make connections beyond the first term. Linked to this, several international students wanted there to be more events during the University holidays as they said those remaining in Bristol during these periods often felt isolated.

"I felt a bit isolated during Christmas… So I became a bit homesick. I wish there would be more events during Christmas for international students."

Some participants also emphasised that holding events regularly (instead of infrequently or just at the start of the year) is very important for allowing students to make strong connections.

"I think the main factor that determines whether that you actually stay good, good friends with someone is being able to meet them multiple times and in a similar manner. And so events and such should also reflect that."

Another suggestion was to ensure that there is a wide variety of events on offer including activities that do not revolve around alcohol. Reducing or eliminating the cost of participating in groups and

events was also frequently mentioned, as cost acts as a deterrent for many students. One participant described how she had made stronger connections through volunteering than through societies, because she could see the same people repeatedly without having to pay.

"Apart from societies, I've found volunteering activities to be very helpful. After Christmas, when I felt lonely, I went to the Volunteer Fair at Bristol. Since it is of course free, I'm willing to go there every week."

The majority of students seemed to prefer events to be relaxed and informal, with some also describing more formal events as intimidating. Some students also liked the opportunity to attend events with a friend or someone they already knew and did not like when students who had attended together were split up.

Lastly, many participants called for better communications around how to participate in student groups and events. They felt that this information was not sufficiently clear or accessible. This topic is discussed in more detail in the "Communications" section.

Areas for Action

1. Extra-Curricular activity organisers, whether students or staff, should support entry/access throughout the year, not just at select designated points. They should consider and plan for the experience of students' joining later in the year.
2. Extra-Curricular activity organisers should consider how to use communications to counter-act the perception that students have "missed the boat" if they don't participate in 'Welcome' activities.
3. Any programme of events and activities running over holiday periods needs to be promoted effectively, and where possible, students should also be supported to self-organise.

Accommodation

The survey results indicated that students' accommodation and housing was a key setting for making and maintaining close connections. The research also indicates that in university-allocated accommodation, community building is working well for most students. However, there were differing satisfaction levels between halls of residence when it came to friendships made in that accommodation. Additionally, some groups of students are not benefitting as much as the majority of students from connections and community in accommodation. In particular, students living further from campus (both in University and private accommodation) were more likely to feel disconnected and excluded.

The importance of connections in and made through accommodation

Throughout the research, making friends through shared accommodation emerged as the most common way in which students form strong and often long-lasting connections with one another.

When asked who the person or people they feel most connected to at the University is, the most common response was a person or people from the same accommodation/housing as them, with almost half of survey respondents (49%) selecting that option.

This figure was even higher when respondents were segmented for just students living in University of Bristol allocated halls (65%) and, when students not in university allocated accommodation were asked how they met their current housemates, the majority reported having met them through their halls in their first year at Bristol (183 responses).

Students were also asked to indicate how well they get on with the people they live with by selecting one of four options ranging from 'We do not get on at all' to 'We get on very well'. 89% of all respondents said that they get on either 'very well' or 'quite well' with their house or flatmates and these results were very similar across students living in UoB allocated accommodation, private halls in Bristol, or private sector rental accommodation in Bristol.

Discussion in the focus groups about friendships with housemates also supported the value of these relationships to students with some participants speaking about the feeling of support these friendships provided and the positive impact of this on their wellbeing, while others expressed worry at moving out of university accommodation and no longer living with some of the friends they'd made there.

> *"a lot of them are graduating, which is gonna be really sad... they've sort of seen me through"*

The above findings demonstrates that the people that students live with are, for many, core friendships and sources of connection at the University. They also highlight the additional importance of these friendships to students in their first year in university accommodation, both as a source of friendship during that first year but also for the potential to be long-lasting as many continue to live together in future years of study.

Common spaces and community building in University Accommodation

Many students in the focus groups who lived or had lived in university owned accommodation described making close connections there in a variety of ways. These seem to be a mix of structured community building events/opportunities and naturally occurring meetings, and both were broadly positively received.

When discussing how they formed social connections in halls in the focus groups, students frequently mentioned that access to sociable common spaces is an important factor

This point is in line with findings from the University's Student Accommodation Project 2022. This report also found that residences with high satisfaction scores for common spaces have a positive correlation with those scoring well for sense of belonging, suggesting that investing in common spaces can improve sense of belonging. Manor Hall, Northwell House, Dean St Works, Goldney Hall, Hiatt Baker self-catered and University Hall were all cited as examples of properties with strong belonging and common space satisfaction scores.[2]

Focus group discussions supported this finding, with several students commenting on a lack of communal social space in their accommodation and the impact they felt this had on being able to make friends in their halls.

"I think a big thing for catered halls that made friendship growth really difficult was the lack of communal space."

Different social experiences between halls of residence

In the survey, students were asked to rate various aspects of their university social life on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (poor) to 4 (good). One of the aspects included was 'friendships with those you live with (both in your flat/house and in your wider accommodation e.g. friends in your halls).'

As might be expected, student satisfaction in this area varied between different halls of residence. Interestingly, these ratings roughly correlated with the results for the question on community and sense of belonging in the University's Student Accommodation Project report, for which students were asked if living in their residence helps them to feel part of a community. While the focusses of these two questions differ slightly, the broad correlation between the results means it can be reasonably concluded that some halls offer a better social experience to most students when compared with other halls.[3]

Distance from campus (for both halls and private accommodation)

While many students reported making friends in halls, students who lived further away from campus often described feelings of disconnection and isolation. This was for a variety of reasons, including travel time to university as a barrier to socialising, and feeling like there were a lack of social events where they lived.

The barrier of travel time to University was spoken about by students in University accommodation far from campus (e.g. Bath). It was cited as a deterrent for coming into the University for both teaching (which we know from this research is another key source of friendship

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[2] University of Bristol Student Accommodation Project, 2022 (p86)
[3] University of Bristol Student Accommodation Project, 2022 (p85)

and connections) and socialising, for example due to not being able to get home after a night out. Together, this was explained as posing challenges for making friends at the start of the year.

"I think with certain friendships, basically I didn't get a chance to... cement it in at the beginning because I didn't see them very often." [Student in Bath accommodation]

Lack of events happening closer to where they lived was also given as an issue, and similar sentiments were expressed by students from other study levels and year groups who lived in private accommodation far from campus. These students talked about feeling as though events and social activities felt very Clifton-centric and expressed interest in some events taking place in other areas of the city.

Areas for Action

1. Using this, and other recent research, further explore the disparities in student connection and communities in different halls of residence, with a view to permeating best practice and levelling up halls with the lowest ratings.
2. Look at specific interventions and support for students in private accommodation and/or those living far from campus, ensuring that they can participate in existing activities as well as having the means to self-organise.

Campus Social Spaces

It was clear from the focus groups that campus social spaces are important settings for facilitating and maintaining social connections. Participants had lots of positive feedback for places such as Senate House, Royal Fort Gardens and "hubs" allocated to specific courses. Despite these positives, students called for spaces with longer opening hours, greater capacity, and where they could bring their own food. There also seemed to be some confusion among students around what spaces were available for them to access and when.

Senate House and course "hubs"

Several students spoke positively about social spaces on campus, especially those within Senate House (the ground floor, the Global Lounge, the SU Living Rooms, and the SU Loft). They explained that they provided comfortable, welcoming environments to relax with friends. Some students felt that these were good places to spend time with existing friends, rather than to meet new people.

"When you provide the spaces, the friendships come from it. Senate House is a really good example of that. Especially the living rooms are so lovely..."

There was also discussion in the focus groups about the way in which having a "hub" for their programme of study can work well for students in terms of having a meeting place but also developing a sense of belonging to their course. Students whose courses were based at a specific

location or had their own building talked about this working well. The Graduate School of Education and the School of Psychological Science were both offered as good examples of how this is working. Students without this felt that a physical space would have helped them to feel more connected.

"It's a real shame that medical students don't have a department or a building or even a room … I feel like a common room … would've prevented me from doing a lot of studying on my own in my room. I feel like I would've really appreciated that when I was in the earlier days of my course."

Length and communication of opening hours and cost to access

Many students talked about spaces around the University having very limited opening hours, or opening hours which did not work around their course or other commitments. Those spaces which are open for longer periods, such as some of the libraries, were not always perceived to be usable social spaces unless you were meeting specifically to study. Alongside this, there seemed to be a lack of awareness about which spaces could be used and when.

Students did not always know where to find information about what spaces are available, at what times and how the spaces can be used. Extending opening hours, especially of the spaces in main buildings, would also be appreciated by the student community.

When students had found good places to socialise, availability of space within these was also raised as an issue. Some students talked about meeting with friends to socialise and not being able to do this because of a lack of space.

This was especially the case with libraries. Students asked whether it was possible to track how busy libraries are online, so students can make a judgment about whether to travel in, or publish information about peak busy times to help students to avoid this disappointment by planning to meet elsewhere.

Another example of social spaces existing in the University but barriers still being in place relates to the cost of entry to use certain areas. Students talked about there being cafes and bars but not always wanting to use these because of the expectation that you should buy a drink or food, or that you weren't allowed to work on laptops in them. This also extended to the hospitality options in Clifton more broadly, which were felt to be expensive. Allowing students to bring their own food and drink into more spaces would help make these university spaces more useable. Providing facilities to heat up food or to make tea/coffee was also mentioned as an option.

"Being able to [socialise] in places where you don't necessarily have to spend money would also be great. …The cafes and stuff being run by Source, you have to buy something [and] you can't even read something on your laptop. It doesn't feel like your university when you get moved on by someone. That doesn't always feel great."

Other key themes that emerged in the focus groups linked to social spaces included disability access and common spaces in student halls. These are discussed in the Inclusion section and the Accommodation section, respectively.

Finally, it's worth noting that almost all of the key findings here (the positive feedback for Senate House, issues around wayfinding, the desire for kitchen facilities and for study spaces with greater capacity) were also key findings in the University's recent "Campus Experience Index Report."[4]

Areas for Action

1. Maximise access to existing spaces on campus for students to connect and socialise, and reduce barriers where possible (lowering or removing costs, increasing opening times, clearly communicating availability, and making clear the purpose of those spaces)
2. Consider increasing the number of spaces made available for student use and activity across the estate, but with a focus on space in schools/departments and accommodation.

Inclusion and Identity

Throughout the research different identity groups reported varying experiences and challenges related to sense of belonging, making connections, and participating in university communities.

Survey respondents were asked to rate on a ten-point scale how much they felt that they belonged to the University, the city of Bristol, and the UK, where 1 represented 'I don't belong' and 10 represented 'I fully belong'.

The average sense of belonging at the University of Bristol, in Bristol, and in the UK, was good. Below is an identity characteristic breakdown of responses: highlighted in light red is below average (within 10% below); highlighted in bright red is more than 10% below average.

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[4] University of Bristol Campus Experience Index Report, June 2022, p3

	UoB	Bristol	UK
Total respondent average	**6.61**	**7.25**	**7.97**
BAME students	6.45	6.77	6.87
International students	6.69	6.57	6.04
EU students	6.10	6.18	5.76
Trans students	5.81	5.92	6.81
LGBQ+ students	6.51	7.48	7.98
State-school educated students	6.44	7.25	8.10
Disabled students	5.63	6.52	7.56
Students aged 22+	6.16	6.77	7.20
Students with caring responsibilities	5.77	5.68	6.88

Disabled students, trans students and students with caring responsibilities expressed the poorest sense of belonging to the University. BAME students, EU students, and students aged 22+ also experience a 'sense of belonging gap.' International students expressed a strong sense of belonging to the University, but not to Bristol or the UK.

The scores for LGBQ+ and state-school educated students fell below the respondent average at the University but were above the respondent average for Bristol and the UK. This suggests a University-specific culture concern.

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate, broadly speaking, how welcoming they found the University to be. Overall the results for this were good, with 82% of respondents saying they found it to be 'very welcoming' or 'more welcoming than not'. However, there were disparities in responses between different groups. Some of the biggest disparities are outlined below.

41% of Arab students and 26% of Jewish students felt the University was 'not very' or 'not welcoming'. This compares to 16% of Asian students, 16% of Black students, 22% of mixed/multiple ethnicity students, 6% of Latin American/Hispanic and 15% of white students.

24% of disabled students felt the University was 'not very' or 'not welcoming'. This compares to 15% of students without a disability.

18% of state school educated students felt the University was 'not very' or 'not welcoming'. This compares to 16% of private school educated students and 11% of home-schooled students.

This section looks in more detail at some identity groups who appeared multiple times in some of these measures. If you would like to access additional information relating to other identity groups, please contact the researchers who worked on this project.
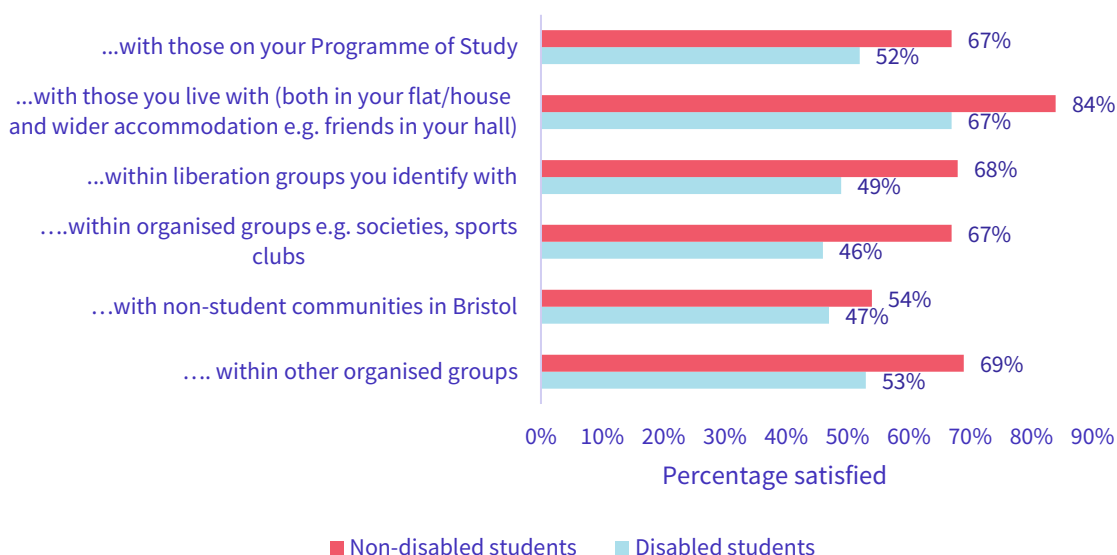
Disabled students

Throughout the research project, disabled students emerged as a group who felt less of a sense of belonging to the University and who found it more difficult to make social connections than non-disabled students. Several survey findings illustrated the extent of this.

When asked to rate how much they felt like they belong at the University of Bristol on a scale of one to ten, the average for disabled students was 5.63, in comparison to 6.86 for non-disabled students. This was the lowest score of any demographic group.

When asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their university social life, disabled students had lower satisfaction scores **in every area** than non-disabled students. These results are outlined in the graph below. The biggest contrast here was for satisfaction with 'friendships within organised groups e.g. societies and sports clubs', where there was a 21% gap.

Satisfaction with friendships... (n=1,119)

Category	Non-disabled students	Disabled students
...with those on your Programme of Study	67%	52%
...with those you live with (both in your flat/house and wider accommodation e.g. friends in your hall)	84%	67%
...within liberation groups you identify with	68%	49%
....within organised groups e.g. societies, sports clubs	67%	46%
...with non-student communities in Bristol	54%	47%
.... within other organised groups	69%	53%

Percentage satisfied

■ Non-disabled students ■ Disabled students

Additionally, 52% of disabled students said they found it 'a bit' or 'very' difficult to meet other students with the same interests and hobbies, compared to 32% of non-disabled students.

In the focus group for disabled students, participants mostly discussed feelings of exclusion and the barriers to forming social connections they had experienced at Bristol. These findings may offer some insight into the poor sense of belonging and social satisfaction scores given in the survey.

The University and Bristol SU's response to the pandemic

One of the most frequently mentioned points on this subject was the University's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Participants strongly felt that clinically vulnerable students did not receive enough consideration or support from the University during or following lockdown restrictions. The lack of enforcement of mask wearing and pressure to attend in-person teaching and events were given as examples of this lack of consideration. Participants explained how this led to feelings of being forgotten about, as well as anxiety around attending social events because they did not know if they would be safe.

"I just felt like when everything went back to face-to-face, pretty much everything, there was no online 'thing' anymore. Despite the fact that people were still vulnerable, people still hadn't had vaccines...."

Ableism in the student body

Several focus group participants also described how other students' attitudes towards disabled people affected their social relationships. They described how they formed close connections with others who were knowledgeable about and understanding of disabilities, whilst they felt alienated by students who were either uninformed or insensitive. This was also linked to the pandemic, as several participants described instances where other students had made negative or dismissive comments about the needs of clinically vulnerable people.

"As soon as someone expressed a lax attitude towards covid I felt like I had to cut them off which blocked a lot of social connections which might have been really nice."

Several participants called for the SU or University to help raise awareness of visible and invisible disabilities among the student community.

"...the stigma of it could cause disabled people who want to participate in these spaces not to … Making the wider community more aware of neurodiversity and physical disabilities – that would also be really helpful"

Physical inaccessibility and difficulties getting reasonable adjustments

Another commonly mentioned theme was the inaccessibility of the University.

Between 34% and 39% of disabled students reported that their required adjustments were met 'rarely' or 'not much of the time' in various areas of their university life. This included 37% who gave this rating for their studies, and 39% who gave this rating for student groups.

The inaccessibility of campus and university buildings for students with physical disabilities was also a commonly reoccurring theme.

Not only does this cause these students to feel excluded in that the University is not set up for them, but it also actively prevents them from participating in the social side of university life. Some participants also described experiencing difficulties getting reasonable adjustments put in place.

"For me, like the University of Bristol campus is rubbish for accessibility … In terms of how this fits into socializing, like for me, getting from my building to the students Union is an ordeal; it's not an easy thing to do, and because the students union doesn't have any like disabled parking bays where you could drive there and pull up like that is like really like a big barrier for me to get involved in social groups."

Lack of awareness of support available

Finally, as well as a call for increased support from the University, several students in the focus group noted that there needs to be better communication of the support that already exists. Some of them mentioned not being aware of the University's new sensory room, or the SU's neurodiversity society – knowledge of which they said would have been valuable to them.

Working class-identifying students

In the survey, students were asked what they thought the 'mainstream culture' of the University is. 846 students answered this open text question. The second most common theme (147 responses, or 17% of respondent answers) was 'middle/upper class'. In the focus groups, particularly the session for working-class identifying participants, students discussed how this pervading 'middle/upper class' culture can exclude those who don't feel a part of it.

In the survey, students were asked to rate their sense of belonging to the University, the city, and the UK out of 10. Interestingly, state-school educated students only reported a lower sense of belonging (6.44) than the respondent average (6.61) in relation to the University, but not the city of Bristol or the UK as a whole (as was the case for some other identity groups). This indicates that for this group there is something specific to the University experience or culture that may have an impact on their sense of belonging here.

Differences in experiences between state and privately educated students

In the survey, respondents were asked about the type of secondary school they attended. It is recognized that this can only be used as a broad indicator of class and not an exact measure, however the differences in experience between these two groups may be of some relevance here.

State-school educated students were overall less satisfied than privately educated students with both the number and quality of the friendships and social connections they have at the University. This contrast is shown in the graph below.

Satisfaction with number and quality of social connections
(n= 1,191)

Private-school educated students   State-school educated students
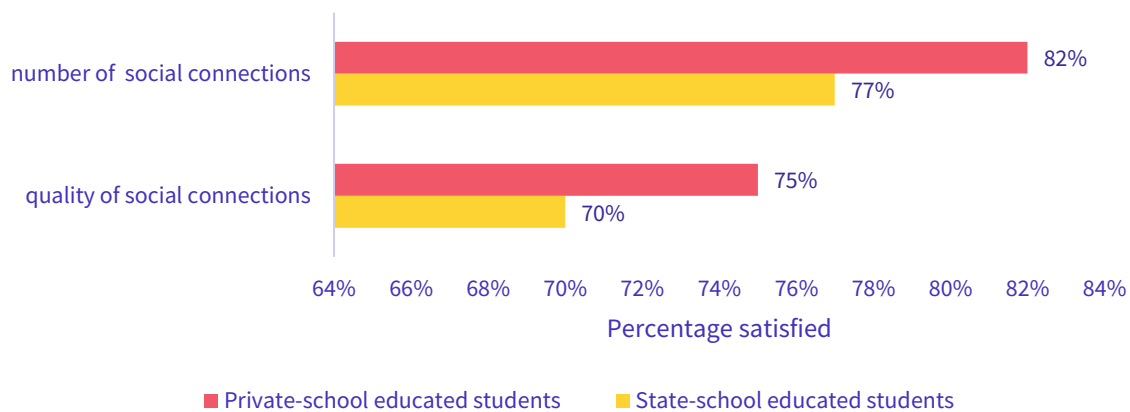
Interestingly, 43% of private-school educated students reported that the person/people they felt most connected to at the University came 'from an organised student group', compared to 33% of state-school educated students. As student groups were found to be the most common way students reported trying to make friends with like-minded people, this suggests that students from state schools may be finding it more difficult to make meaningful connections in this way.

These findings show that some students from both state and private schools face challenges in making connections while at the University, but that state-school educated students seem to consistently experience these challenges more so than their privately educated peers.

Feeling outside of 'posh' culture

In the focus groups, students gave numerous examples of how this 'middle/upper class' or 'posh' culture is perceived by students, and how it is experienced by students who do not feel they can relate to it. Working class students described feeling outside of an exclusive network based on shared norms, experiences, schools, humour, and pre-existing personal connections.

"I remember in halls this guy asking me what school I went to, as if I didn't go to… a school he knew and it was just very bizarre, so it was a big shock to the system."

"They're like, 'Oh, have you been to this place in France?" and they've all done that, and I've never done anything like that…"

"This year especially, there's been balls and stuff. My housemates were talking about buying dresses and I've never really bought a nice dress before; nice shoes… And I'm like, I don't know what to get; I've never done that before."

In some instances, working class identifying students gave examples of more direct microaggressions and how this hindered their sense of belonging and the quality of connections they formed.

"When I first joined Uni, I'm from Liverpool, my accent was a lot stronger. I was in halls and people were saying they couldn't understand me. Just because of my accent and stuff like that, so I feel like that definitely got in the way of making connections."

International students

The survey found that, broadly speaking, international students feel welcome at the University and have a relatively strong sense of belonging to the institution. However, satisfaction scores with their social connections were generally lower than for home students. Throughout the research, it was clear that this group had slightly different needs to home students and encounter different barriers to forming friendships.[5]

When asked to rate how much they feel like they belong at the University on a scale of one to ten, the average score for international students was 6.69, which was higher than the score given by home students (6.62). However, for EU students this was lower (6.10).
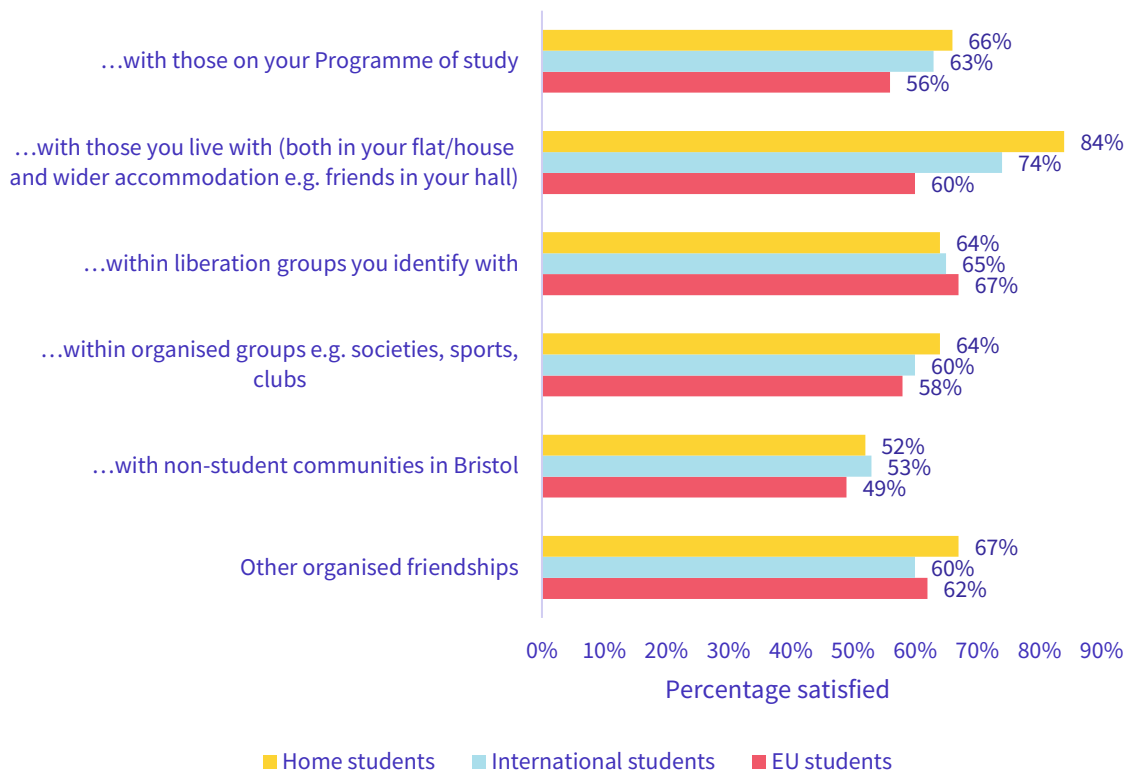
When asked how welcoming they found the University to be, 82% of international students said it was either 'quite' or 'very' welcoming – the same percentage as home students. For EU students, this was also high at 84%.

However, interestingly, when asked if they feel like a part of the mainstream culture at the University, 64% of international students said either 'rarely' or 'not much of the time', which was much higher than the proportion of either home or EU students who gave this answer (45% and 48%).

Also, when asked to rate their satisfaction with friendships in various aspects of their social life, international students gave lower satisfaction scores than home students in every area apart from 'friendships with non-student communities in Bristol' and 'liberation groups you identify with'. The biggest contrast here was for 'friendships with those you live with (both in your flat/house and wider accommodation e.g. friends in your hall.')

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[5] This section mostly focuses on the experiences of international students, as only two EU students attended the focus groups. Some figures from the survey relating to EU students have been included.

Satisfaction with friendships… (n = 1,119)

Category	Home students	International students	EU students
…with those on your Programme of study	66%	63%	56%
…with those you live with (both in your flat/house and wider accommodation e.g. friends in your hall)	84%	74%	60%
…within liberation groups you identify with	64%	65%	67%
…within organised groups e.g. societies, sports, clubs	64%	60%	58%
…with non-student communities in Bristol	52%	53%	49%
Other organised friendships	67%	60%	62%

Percentage satisfied

■ Home students ■ International students ■ EU students

In line with the results overall, the biggest expectation and reality gap for international students was for friendships with those on their programme of study. 87% expected these to be 'satisfactory' or 'good' but only 62% gave this rating for their actual friendships (24% gap).

During the focus groups, international students discussed a range of barriers to forming social connections that they had experienced. Examining these could offer some possible explanations for why their social satisfaction scores are lower, and what the role of the SU or University could be in improving this.

A key theme that emerged in the focus groups, as in other parts of the research, was the culture of drinking and partying at the University and how many international students find this alienating. This is discussed in detail in the 'Extracurricular Activities' section so has not been mentioned here. Many international students also said they wished they had better social connections with their course mates, but this is discussed in the 'Academic' section.

Limited opportunities to connect with home students

In the focus groups, many international students described wanting to socialise and connect with students from different cultures – particularly home students – but feeling that opportunities to

do this were limited. This was felt in all areas of student life but was particularly mentioned in relation to academic courses and social events and trips.

"I went on a countryside trip, supported by the SU […] We were all Chinese […] I'd hoped it would be more cultural. I don't know why the local students don't join it. It's a problem"

Language barriers and cultural differences

Many international students also explained that they found it difficult to form connections with home students due to there being a language barrier and/or cultural differences. In some cases, a lack of confidence in their language skills could lead to a general lack of social confidence when interacting with home students. Several students expressed that they felt this disconnection with home students was their own fault.

"It's kind of difficult for me to get a deep relationship with local people, I think partially because my English is not that good and sometimes it's just quite difficult to follow what they are saying. And I think because of the cultural differences, we don't have very much in common, even if we have some common topics I can't discuss it very deep with them because of the language. I think it's maybe my own issue that I should work on"

The Global Lounge

Many international students spoke very warmly of the Global Lounge: its ethos, its approach to community building, its celebration of different cultures and its events. Participants described how they had made good friends there either through volunteering, the language café, or other events. Some students called for even more activities encouraging cultural exchange, as they said these were so beneficial for international students.

"Last year I've been to a lot of the global lounge events and I found them super helpful in meeting with individuals who are very open minded and very open, too. … I made some very, very good connections from there."

BAME-identifying students

The survey found that BAME-identifying students were more likely to deem it important to meet other students from a similar background or liberation group to them than white students. Many BAME-identifying students in the focus groups mentioned that representation and visibility of other BAME students on campus was important to them in fostering feelings of belonging.

Importance of meeting students from a similar background

Of all survey respondents, 46% said that it was 'quite' or 'very' important for them to meet students from a similar background or liberation group, but this figure rises to 59% when examining BAME-identifying students' responses specifically. This percentage is higher for some ethnicities than others.

- Of ALL Asian Bangladeshi students, 86% felt it was important to make connections based on shared characteristics, with this being a more prevalent value among Home (66.7%) Asian Bangladeshis than International or EU.
- Of ALL Black African Students, 79% felt it was important to make connections based on shared characteristics, with this being more of a prevalent value among International than EU or Home Black Africans.
- Of ALL Black Caribbean students, 67% felt it was important to make connections based on shared characteristics, with this being an equal split of prevalent value among international and Home Black Caribbeans.

White Northern Irish, White Scottish, and Latin American/Hispanic students reported being the least concerned with meeting someone from a shared background in the survey.

In looking to meet other students with shared characteristics, focus group participants spoke about searching for and joining ethnicity-based groups, societies, and networks, and looking to connect with students that shared their identity online before coming to the university. Students' discussions also demonstrated the importance of intersectionality in seeking these connections. In examples where students had made meaningful and long-lasting connections, they had often met students with other shared personal characteristics or circumstantial commonalities (such as course or accommodation). Similarly, in some examples students gave regarding joining these groups that were less successful, other aspects of their identity were not being catered for.

"I did find it a bit difficult to make friends. For example, in the Black and Afro Caribbean Society. A lot of the people in it are a little bit younger than me, so it's like there's a little bit of disconnect there… maybe I'm a bit too old"

Representation and visibility

In discussions with BAME-identifying students, representation and visibility at the University and on campus emerged as key themes that were important to them.

Some students spoke about the concerns they, and their family and friends, had ahead of their beginning at Bristol, which they perceived to be a 'white' campus and city.

In some cases, these feelings of unease were successfully counteracted by students seeking out online communities or connections with students ahead of starting and researching and seeing events or student groups related to their identity or ethnicity.

However, in some cases, students spoke of how a lack of visibility of students that looked like them had impacted their opportunities to make connections during their time at university.

"Some societies that I wanted to join, to do with politics or some environment thing, I'd just see them on social media and everyone would be white and then I'd just get really intimidated and then I wouldn't end up going and seeing what's about, other than the ones that were like, to do with being BME or Asian"

An alternative experience that was also discussed in the focus groups was that ahead of some students starting at Bristol was that they had expected the University and city to be more ethnically diverse than it is. Students discussed University outreach programmes in particular as a source of this inconsistency.

"I did the Insight into Summer School programme, so I thought it was going to be quite diverse because most of the participants on that were BME, so were the mentors… But I think I had a bit of a skewed perception of it… I don't think Bristol is as diverse as I expected from the Summer School."

Areas for Action

1. Initiatives that cater for those with the lowest sense of belonging should be enhanced and upscaled, and anything open to the whole student body needs to consider and cater for all identity group needs
2. Post pandemic recovery must ensure disabled students and/or students who are shielding do not miss out on the opportunity to participate in university communities

Communications

Communications between students and from the University or SU were persisting themes across the research. Students frequently voiced that they had trouble accessing information that could enable them to form connections and build a sense of belonging, such as relating to available support, student groups, events, and other opportunities. However, there were examples of students initiating their own communication methods, using official University and SU social media groups as a starting point.

Students connecting online

Many students in the focus groups discussed how they had made connections through social media. Some (particularly international students) spoke positively about having sought out course mates online prior to starting their studies to ensure they would have some people they knew upon arrival. Students typically spoke of using pre-established Facebook groups as an entry point from which to then build lasting group chats themselves, predominantly via WhatsApp.

Connecting virtually in the lead-up to Welcome offered an icebreaker from which students could develop their in-person connections. Further support to set up these online groups and make them widely accessibly would be broadly appreciated.

"I joined the Physics course group chat... and started messaging people. Some I did end up meeting in the first Welcome lecture. I was like, 'Oh, I recognize you – hi! Finally meeting the first time!', which was really nice because you sort of know a name to a face and you can just go from there."

As discussed in Inclusion (BAME-identifying students), students spoke highly of the pre-enrolment messages they received, which worked to make them feel more comfortable.

Students frequently referenced use of Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook as means to connect with others and seek information. Facebook was a particularly divisive platform: younger students used it as an access point from which to connect and stay on other platforms, whilst older students relied on it as a primary source of information.

Challenges and limitations of student group chats

While large course WhatsApp groups allow students to initially connect with their course mates, it is not a consistent practice and relies on students taking the initiative to set up or find the group. Students also talked about the challenge of finding each other's contact details to initiate WhatsApp groups with some suggesting that support to create these groups more officially would be beneficial.

It is also important to note that with large cohort sizes, these groups chats are not always conducive to students sustaining quality connections, but rather function as starting point for students to connect. In some cases, and over time, large group chats may even pose a challenge to some students in feeling connected with other group members.

"I'm not gonna make any friends on a group chat of 320 people because it's just too overwhelming and no one talks on a group chat like that in a friendly manner. It's just sort of, 'Does anyone know when the test is due?'"

University and SU communications

As has been found in other University and SU student consultations, students reported some issues with University and SU communications they receive or seek out.[6] Throughout the focus groups students spoke about not being aware of opportunities and mechanisms available to help them connect or support them if they were struggling.

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[6] This finding appears in the Student Experience Programme's Student Journey Mapping exercise (2020) and Student Communications Consultation (2021), and in Bristol SU's Communications Survey (2021 – 22).

Bristol SU

In terms of communications sent out centrally, students spoke about how well promotional and pre-enrolment messages had worked for them. These emails and postal communications were positively received and made students excited to join the University. Some students felt, however, that the sense of belonging created by these communications was not maintained by messages received once they were on their courses – as if this positivity dipped after Welcome had finished.

There was a lack of clarity about who messages were coming from, e.g. from the SU, the University, Partner / Support organisations. Students also talked about the volume of emails coming from these accounts being hard to manage which resulted in many messages going unread. This is an issue in terms of trying to get students to engage with events and having an awareness of University wide practices. This also resulted in students seeking support from one organisation when another may have been more suitable as they did not know the two were separate (e.g., housing support from the SU rather than Resilife).

In terms of support from the SU specifically, students made some clear suggestions for improving communication. It was agreed by many participants that the SU website is not user friendly because information is hard to find.[7] This had resulted in many students not knowing about the ways in which the SU can offer support. It also meant there was some confusion about the SU role.

Postgraduate students felt that much of the communication sent out was geared towards the undergraduate population and would appreciate more targeted communications regarding community building opportunities and mechanisms in order to feel more like they belong to the University community.

Areas for Action

1. Recognise that students feel overwhelmed by the number of emails they receive, and consider this in the promotion of opportunities, finding other ways to spread the information.
2. Institutional communications planners should consider if we are re-enforcing student perceptions of the mainstream culture of the university in an unhelpful way.

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[7] It should be noted that as of August 2022, Bristol SU has launched a new website. This feedback was gathered before then, so is referring to the old website.

Appendix A

Methodology

The aim of this research was to gather a robust and reliable dataset that was representative of student views, which also captured the individual experiences of students navigating their sense of belonging and personal connections. The research project was therefore designed to be a triangulated (mixed method) study, with each method of research and consultation feeding into the design of the next method.

Firstly, several workshop consultations were held, to identify key issues around belonging, connection, and community and to test student engagement with the subject area. Four workshops were conducted in January 2022. The workshops had a total of 12 participants, all of whom held student representative roles: 5 of the SU's elected 2021/22 Officers, 4 network Chairs, 2 faculty representatives and 1 student trustee. From these sessions, the researchers were able to design the online questionnaire in line with students' definitions of community and ask questions that were relevant to their experience of finding (or not finding) a sense of belonging here at Bristol.

An online questionnaire was then launched, which sought to explore the social experiences of students. This survey incorporated questions around individualisation of University experience; how students have attempted to make friends; what is important to students when making friends; how well they fit the University's mainstream culture (and what they feel that culture is); inclusivity and students' sense of belonging in their studies, student groups and living situations; what stands in the way of finding successful connections, and how well their experience is meeting their expectations. Several open-ended questions were included, where it was felt that students' own words were necessary. Running an online survey granted students' anonymity to tell their stories. The workshops informed the language used in the survey, to avoid potential misinterpretation of the questions. The resulting data was thematically analysed and used to design the focus group questions, as well as identifying the demographics we needed to hear more from.

We then went on to run 12 semi-structured focus groups. The sessions were as follows:

1. Trans and Non-Binary Students*
2. Students from Working Class Backgrounds*
3. Disabled students*
4. Postgraduate Researchers
5. Postgraduate Taught
6. Students over the Age of 22
7. BAME Students*
8. Black Students*
9. Mental Health and Wellbeing
10. First Year Undergraduates
11. Intermediate and Final Year Undergraduates

12. International and EU Students*

These categories were chosen for the focus groups as the survey found varying experiences based on identity and level of study. Focus groups with an asterisk (*) were sessions ran by student leaders who were a part of that identity group. These student leaders were trained by Bristol SU's researchers on how to effectively lead and support focus groups. By running these focus groups, students were able to speak in greater depth than the survey accommodated for, and the semi-structured nature of these sessions gave insight into what the bigger priorities for issues around belonging, connection, and community were. Through this qualitative method, we were able to capture the nuance of individual experiences within the overarching themes identified in the survey and authenticate our survey findings.

Ethics and Safeguarding

As a core principle of Bristol SU's mandate for responsible research, ethical consideration was given to the design and implementation of these research methods. The survey started with a splash page that included an informed consent statement, which gave respondents information about the survey and how their data will be used. The page also contained a caution statement, warning potential respondents that if thinking about their social connections was upsetting, they should either pace themselves, contact the researchers about alternative involvement opportunities or not participate. Members of the University's Inclusion Team, as well as the Project Working Group which included two Student Officers, reviewed the language used when asking questions about identity in the survey.

When it came to the focus groups, part of the training student leaders received was around managing the disclosure of traumatic content and avoiding re/traumatisation of participants. All participants received a consent form to fill in and a briefing on their potential involvement, were told how their data would be used, and how to revoke their consent. They were assured that they could take a break or stop participating at any time. A safeguarding resource was compiled, listing useful services to engage with after their session, and participants were asked to provide their phone number for a debrief check-in, where it was felt necessary.

A DPIA for the project was compiled and reviewed by the University's Information Governance Manager & Data Protection Officer.

Sample and Representativeness

Broadly, this research was representative of the student population, with slight over and underrepresentation, detailed below. This means that the views heard are inclusive of the entire student population, and the conclusions drawn are likely to be relevant to University of Bristol students.

Survey Sample Representativeness

The survey received 1,344 responses. This corresponds to 4% of the student population (2021-22). The largest proportion of survey respondents (of all study levels) commenced their studies this academic year (49%).

Postgraduate Researchers are well represented, Postgraduate Taught students are slightly underrepresented. International Students are underrepresented, while EU and Home students are overrepresented.

Students were also asked to state their academic school, accommodation type, and halls of residence (where applicable), which are not included here. Please contact the researchers if you would like to see breakdowns of these categories or survey data relating to them.

Category	Type	% of survey	% of student population (2021 - 2022 data)
Level of study	Undergraduate	79%	74%
	Postgraduate Taught	13%	19%
	Postgraduate Research	8%	8%
Fee status	Home	78%	71%
	EU	4%	4%
	International(non-EU)	17%	25%

Women are significantly overrepresented in this survey and men are underrepresented. BAME students are slightly underrepresented and white students are overrepresented. Disabled students are slightly overrepresented.

Category	Type	% of survey respondents	% student population (2021 – 2022)
Age	Under 22	69%	Data not available
	Over 22	31%	Data not available
Gender	Woman	62%	55%
	Man	32%	45%
	Non-binary or other	6%	Data not available
Disability (incl. a physical or non-physical disability)	Disability	17%	13%
	No disability	78%	85%
Transgender	Transgender	2%	Data not available
	Cisgender	96%	Data not available
Ethnicity	White	67%	60%

	Black or Minority Ethnic	30%	31%
	Asian	18%	Data not available
	Black	2%	Data not available
	Dual Heritage, mixed or multiple ethnic groups	6%	Data not available
	Other minority ethnicities	5%	Data not available
	Prefer not to say	2%	9%
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	65%	Data not available
	Asexual	4%	Data not available
	Bisexual	16%	Data not available
	Gay	2%	Data not available
	Lesbian	2%	Data not available
	Pansexual	2%	Data not available
	Other minority sexuality	1%	Data not available
	Prefer not to say	8%	Data not available

Focus Group Representativeness

A total of 63 students participated in the focus group sessions. Postgraduate Taught students and Postgraduate Researchers are overrepresented. This is due to having PGT and PGR closed sessions and mixed study levels in other sessions.

International Students are overrepresented, EU and Home Students are slightly underrepresented (again, this is due to having an International closed session and mixed fee statuses in other sessions).

Female identifying participants were also overrepresented in the focus groups.

Category	Type	% of focus group participants	% student population (2021 – 2022)
Level of study	Undergraduate	59%	74%
	Postgraduate Taught	30%	19%
	Postgraduate Research	11%	8%
Fee status	Home	62%	71%
	EU	3%	4%
	International	32%	25%
Gender	Woman	67%	55%
	Man	22%	45%
	Non-binary or other	9%	Data not available