Student Wellbeing Surveys: University of Bath 2017, 2019, and 2020



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1. The surveys: aims and methods

Aims

Three survey datasets measuring student wellbeing at the University of Bath -from 2017, 2019, and 2020- were analysed, with three main aims:

- To compare wellbeing by year, establishing a baseline level of wellbeing for University of Bath students (2017 & 2019) and assessing whether this has changed since the pandemic (2020).
- To explore the relationships between loneliness, belonging, and wellbeing in 2020.
- To compare wellbeing levels between demographic categories, including gender, ethnicity, fee status, and level of study, and how these differ by survey year.

The surveys

Three different online surveys of student wellbeing at the University of Bath (UoB) were conducted:

- November 2017. The UoB Student's Union (the SU)
 employed an external research agency (Alterline) to
 conduct the 'Being well, doing well' survey at Bath, as
 part of a national research project across 14 UK
 universities.
- November 2019. The SU and Student Services collaboratively ran an internal, anonymous wellbeing survey.
- November-December 2020. An anonymous wellbeing survey was conducted as part of the author's PhD project, in collaboration with Student Services and the SU, between 23rd November and 11th December 2020.

The surveys were promoted to all UoB students via email from the SU; Student Services also promoted the 2020 survey. All three surveys included a prize draw incentive, which was provided by Alterline in 2017 and by Student Services in 2019 and 2020.

In the 2019 and 2020 surveys, consent was obtained from participants on an information sheet explaining that their data would be stored securely for comparison to future surveys. Ethical approval for the 2020 survey was provided by the university's Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

All datasets were fully anonymised before analysis took place, and data was stored securely on a university drive. Data analysis was conducted using R version 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020).

Participants

In the 2017, 2019, and 2020 surveys, 1469, 1759, and 2191 students at the University of Bath participated, respectively. The demographic profile of these students is provided in the next section (2. Who took part in the student wellbeing surveys?).

Wellbeing measures

The surveys included a wide range of questions about wellbeing and mental health. However, this report focusses on a year-by-year comparison of the following measures:

- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
 (WEMWBS). A 14-item measure of positive wellbeing
 scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Tennant et al., 2007).
- ONS4 'life satisfaction'. Students were asked "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?" on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely" from the Office for National Statistics' ONS4 personal wellbeing scale (ONS, 2018a).
- Wellbeing in transition to university. Students were asked whether their wellbeing had 'got better', 'stayed the same' or 'got worse' since starting university.
- Sense of community. Students were asked whether
 they feel part of a community of staff and students, on
 a 5-point Likert scale from "Definitely agree" to
 "Definitely disagree".
- Loneliness (direct measure). Students were asked "How often do you feel lonely?" on a 5-point Likert scale from "Never" to "Often/ always" (ONS, 2018b).

In 2020, the following additional measures were analysed:

- ONS4 'worthwhile', 'happiness' and 'anxiety'. Three additional items from the ONS4 personal wellbeing scale (ONS, 2018a).
- Belonging. A 10-item measure of sense of belonging at university, developed by Yorke (2016) and adapted by Imperial College London.
- UCLA-3 Loneliness scale. A 3-item measure of loneliness (Hughes et al., 2004).

Additional data sources

Figures from <u>a University of Bath (2019) report</u> were used as a benchmark demographic profile of the student population. ONS4 scores from <u>the November release of the Student Covid Insights Survey</u> (ONS, 2020) were also used for reference.

2. Who took part in the student wellbeing surveys?

In 2017, 2019, and 2020, approximately 8% (N = 1469), 9% (N = 1759), and 12% (N = 2191)¹ of the University of Bath student population (N = 18868) participated in the wellbeing surveys, respectively. This student population size was based on data from a University of Bath report (2019), which was also used as a benchmark with which to compare the surveys' demographic profiles.

Gender, ethnicity, fee status, and level of study in the three wellbeing surveys and the student population are shown in *Figure 2.1* below. Compared with the University of Bath student population, the wellbeing survey samples contained²:

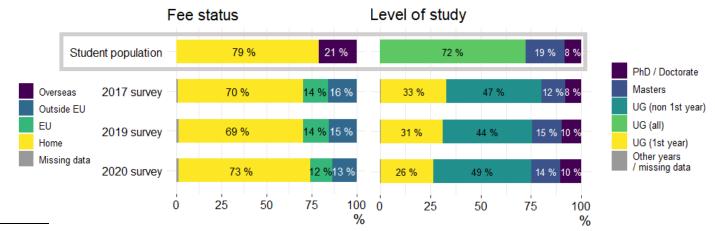
- A greater proportion of female students
- A greater proportion of White students
- A greater proportion of students with overseas fee status (EU or non-EU)
- A greater proportion of undergraduates

Age and placement status

- 70%, 67%, 65% of the 2017, 2019, and 2020 survey respondents were aged 18-21, respectively (no comparable student population age data was available).
- In 2020, 10% of participants were currently on a placement (no placement data for 2017/2019/ student population was available).

Figure 2.1. Demographic characteristics (%) of the 2017 (N = 1469), 2019 (N = 1759) and 2020 (N = 2191) student wellbeing surveys, compared with a 2019 UoB student population benchmark (N = 18868).





¹ An estimated 7% of the 2020 sample comprised duplicate responses, as reflected in entries to a prize draw associated with the survey. An exact duplicate count cannot be determined since survey responses were fully anonymous and stored separately from the prize draw.

 $^{^2}$ $\chi 2$ independence tests explored the listed differences between surveys and the population benchmark, all significant at p < .01.

³ The 'BAME' category comprises non-White ethnicities and is used where specific ethnicity data was not available or not used, to protect anonymity (2017 and 2019 surveys, population benchmark).

3.a. Findings: Wellbeing by year

Establishing a baseline (2017 & 2019) and exploring the effects of the pandemic (2020)

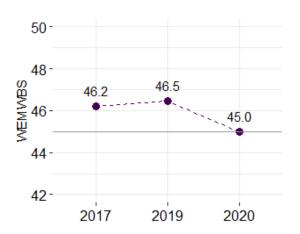
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

WEMWBS (Tennant et al., 2007) is a measure of positive wellbeing, scored between 14 and 70, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing. *Figure 3a.1* displays the average (mean) scores for each survey year.

Baseline. Between 2017 and 2019, scores for University of Bath students did not significantly differ⁴, and were within the average mental wellbeing category according to NHS Direct (40 or below = low, 41-44 = possible depression/anxiety, 45-59 = average, 60-70 = high).

2020. In 2020, the mean WEMWBS score was significantly lower than in 2017 and 2019, falling on the border (score = 45) between the "average" and "possible depression/anxiety" categories.

Figure 3a.1. Mean WEMWBS scores for the 2017 (N = 1469), 2019 (N = 1751), and 2020 (N = 2191) surveys.⁵ Range = 14-70. Horizontal line (score = 45) displays border between "average" and "possible depression/anxiety" categories.



 $^{^4}$ ANOVAs were conducted for WEMWBS and Life satisfaction, controlling for gender, ethnicity, fee status and level of study, with Tukey comparison of means between the 2017, 2019 and 2020 samples. Differences between 2020 and other survey years were significant at p < .001. The difference between 2017 and 2019 on life satisfaction was significant at p < .05.

Life satisfaction (ONS4)

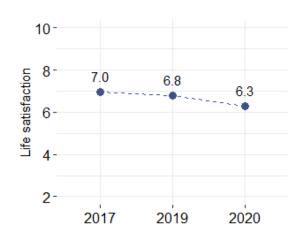
Taken from the Office for National Statistics' ONS4 scale measuring personal wellbeing (ONS, 2018a), students were asked "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?" on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely". *Figure 3a.2* displays the mean scores for each survey year.

Baseline. Life satisfaction scores were slightly lower in 2019 than in 2017, falling from the "high" category to slightly below this, according to the ONS (0-4 = low, 5-6 = medium, 7-8 = high, 9-10 = very high). This change was small but statistically significant.

2020. In 2020, the mean life satisfaction score was significantly lower than in 2017 and 2019, falling within the "medium" category.

However, life satisfaction scores for Bath students in November 2020 were higher than in a survey of UK students conducted by the ONS (mean = 5.3) which also took place in November (ONS, 2020).

Figure 3a.2. Mean life satisfaction scores for the 2017 (*N* = 1469), 2019 (*N* = 1759), and 2020 (*N* = 2191) surveys. Range = 0-10.



 $^{^5}$ Where participants missed 3 or fewer of the 14 WEMWBS items (N=0 in 2017, N=21 in 2019, N=27 in 2020), missing item responses were imputed using the mean of participants' existing responses. Participants with 4 or more missing WEMWBS items (N=0 in 2017 and 2020, N=8 in 2019) were excluded from the analysis.

Wellbeing in transition to university

Students were asked: "Thinking about how you've been feeling on a day-to-day basis since you started university, compared to how you felt before you started university (at your current university on your current course), has your wellbeing...

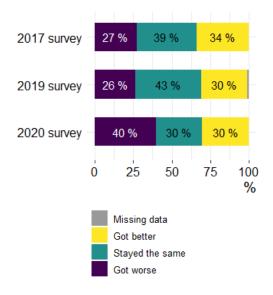
- Got worse since starting university,
- Stayed the same since starting university,
- Got better since starting university."

Baseline. Figure 3a.3 shows the percentage responses for each wellbeing in transition category. There was no significant difference between responses given in 2017 and 2019.⁶

2020. Responses were significantly lower on average in 2020 compared with 2017 and 2019. In 2020, a greater proportion of students responded that their wellbeing had got worse since starting university, and a smaller proportion said that it had stayed the same. However, around a third consistently said their wellbeing got better every year, including during the pandemic in 2020.

Figure 3a.3. Wellbeing in transition: percentage responses for the 2017 (N = 1469), 2019 (N = 1759), and 2020 (N = 2191) surveys.

Since starting university, has your wellbeing...



Sense of community

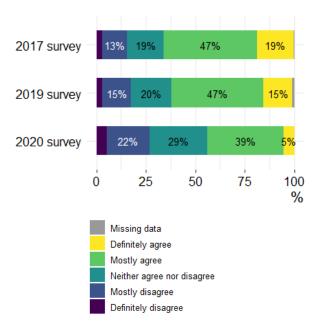
Students were asked "Thinking about your overall experience at university, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I feel part of a community of staff and students'", and responded on a 5-point Likert scale from "Definitely agree" to "Definitely disagree". Figure 3a.4 shows the percentage responses for each sense of community category.

Baseline. A slightly greater proportion of students in 2019 selected "Mostly disagree" or "Neither agree nor disagree", regarding feeling part of a community, and slightly fewer students selected "Definitely agree", compared with in 2017. This difference was small but statistically significant.

2020. Responses were significantly lower in 2020 compared with both 2017 and 2019, with greater proportions of students responding with "Definitely disagree", "Mostly disagree", and "Neither agree nor disagree", and fewer selecting "Definitely agree" and "Mostly agree".

Figure 3a.4. Sense of community: percentage responses for the 2017 (N = 1469), 2019 (N = 1759), and 2020 (N = 2191) surveys.

'I feel part of a community of staff and students'...



⁶ Responses were coded numerically for wellbeing in transition, sense of community and loneliness (direct measure). ANOVA (controlling for gender, ethnicity, fee status and level of study) with Tukey comparison of

Loneliness (direct measure)

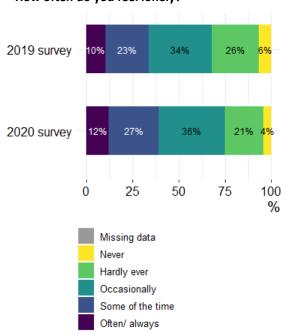
In 2019 and 2020, students responded to a loneliness measure which asked "How often do you feel lonely?" on a 5-point Likert scale from "Never" to "Often/ always" (ONS, 2018b).

Baseline. Figure 3a.5 shows the percentage for each loneliness response category. In 2019, 10% and 23% of students responded that they felt lonely "Often/Always" and "Some of the time", respectively.

2020. In 2020, there was a significant increase in loneliness, compared with 2019, with 12% and 27 % of students responding that they felt lonely "Often/Always" and "Some of the time", respectively.

Figure 3a.5. Loneliness: percentage responses for the 2019 (N = 1759) and 2020 (N = 2191) surveys.

How often do you feel lonely?



3.b. Findings: loneliness, belonging and wellbeing in 2020

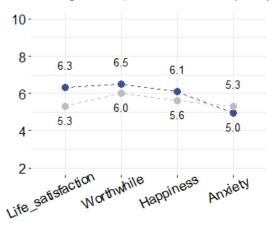
ONS4 wellbeing items

In addition to the life satisfaction item described above (see 3. Wellbeing by year), the ONS4 comprises three other wellbeing items, which were collected in 2020 and are all scored on a scale from 0-10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely":

- Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile? (Worthwhile).
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? (Happiness).
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (Anxiety).

Mean scores for all four ONS4 items are shown in *Figure 3b.1*. ONS4 life satisfaction, 'worthwhile' and happiness scores for Bath students were slightly higher, and anxiety scores were slightly lower, than a UK student survey which also took place in November (ONS, 2020).

Figure 3b.1. ONS4 – mean personal wellbeing scores for the 2020 University of Bath survey, compared with the ONS benchmark. Range = 0-10 ("not at all" to "completely").



- 2020 survey ONS benchmark

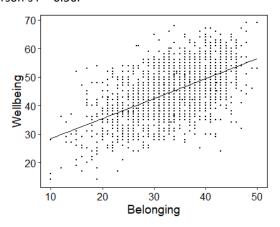
Loneliness, belonging, and wellbeing

In 2020, connection to others was explored via two additional measures: the UCLA loneliness scale (Hughes et al., 2004) and a 10-item measure of sense of belonging at university, an adaptation from Imperial College London of a measure by Yorke (2016).

The mean loneliness score for Bath students was 5.8 (N = 2191) on a scale from 3 (less frequent loneliness) to 9 (more frequent loneliness). The mean score for sense of belonging at university was 33.7 (N = 2191)⁸ on a scale from 10 (low belonging) to 50 (high belonging).

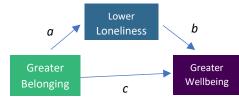
Higher belonging scores were strongly (and statistically significantly) associated with higher wellbeing (WEMWBS) scores (*Figure 3b.2*).

Figure 3b.2. Scatter plot of wellbeing (WEMWBS) and belonging scores in the 2020 Bath survey (N = 2191). Pearson's r = 0.56.



In addition, the relationship between belonging and wellbeing could be partly explained ('mediated') by loneliness⁹ (which was strongly negatively associated with wellbeing) as shown in *Figure 3b.3*.

Figure 3b.3. Mediation model. The effect of belonging on wellbeing (path c) is partly mediated by loneliness (paths $a \times b$).



 $^{^9}$ Causal mediation analysis using a nonparametric bootstrap and Sobel test. Regression coefficients between belonging and wellbeing (b = 0.70) and loneliness and wellbeing (1.98) were significant at p < .001. Direct effect of belonging on wellbeing was 0.47, indirect effect 0.23 (significant at p < .001), indicating partial mediation.

 $^{^7}$ Sample sizes for Life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness, and anxiety items respectively were N = 2191, 2188, 2191, 2190 for the Bath survey and N = 1995, 1991, 1987, and 1988 for the ONS benchmark.

 $^{^8}$ Missing belonging and UCLA-3 loneliness item responses in the 2020 survey were imputed using the mean of participants' existing responses (N = 14 for belonging, N = 1 for loneliness). No participant was missing more than 2 of the 10 belonging items or 1 of the 3 loneliness items.

3.c. Findings: Wellbeing by demographic group

Within each survey year, the association between gender, ethnicity, fee status and level of study and each of the survey measures were tested (*Figure 3c.1* and *Figure 3c.2*). ¹⁰ The differences between survey years was also tested by demographic, to assess whether certain groups were differently impacted by the pandemic.¹¹

Gender

Female students had significantly lower wellbeing (WEWMBS) scores than male students in 2017 and 2019, but not in 2020. In all survey years, female students had significantly greater odds of reporting that their wellbeing had 'got worse' since starting university, and in 2020, they had significantly lower happiness and anxiety scores on the ONS4, compared with male students.

However, there were no gender differences on the ONS4 life satisfaction or worthwhile items, sense of belonging, loneliness (UCLA 3 or the direct measure), or sense of community in any years. Furthermore, there were no gender differences in the amount of change between survey years seen in any measures.

Ethnicity

In 2017 and 2019, ethnicity was categorised as either 'BAME' or White, whilst in 2020 there were four ethnicity categories: Asian, Black, Mixed, and White.

In 2017, being BAME was significantly associated with lower wellbeing (WEMWBS) and life satisfaction scores, compared with being White. ¹² In 2019, being BAME was significantly associated with lower life satisfaction, but not wellbeing (WEMWBS) scores. In 2020, there were no differences by ethnicity on these measures. Instead, in 2020, being White was significantly associated with higher anxiety, compared with Black and Asian groups.

However, there were no significant differences by ethnicity for belonging, loneliness (UCLA-3 or the direct measure), wellbeing in transition, sense of community or the ONS4 worthwhile or happiness items in any years.

Fee status

In 2017, 2019, and 2020, being a home student (compared with EU and/or outside EU) was significantly associated with lower wellbeing (WEMWBS) and significantly greater odds of wellbeing having 'got worse' since starting university. Being a home student was significantly associated with lower life satisfaction scores in 2017 and 2019, and with greater odds of not feeling part of a community of staff and students in 2017 only. In 2020, being a home student was associated with lower ONS4 happiness scores, and a lower sense of belonging at university.

Between 2019 and 2020, EU students saw a greater decrease in life satisfaction than home or outside EU students. However, there were no significant differences by fee status for ONS4 anxiety or worthwhile scores or loneliness (either UCLA-3 or the direct measure).

Level of study

In 2017, 2019, and 2020, being an undergraduate <u>not</u> in first year was significantly associated with lower wellbeing (WEMWBS), lower life satisfaction scores, and greater odds of wellbeing having 'got worse' since starting university, compared with first year undergraduates. In 2017 and 2019, being a non-first year undergraduate was associated with greater odds of not feeling part of a community (compared with first years), and in 2020, they had significantly lower ONS4 worthwhile and happiness scores, and higher anxiety scores.

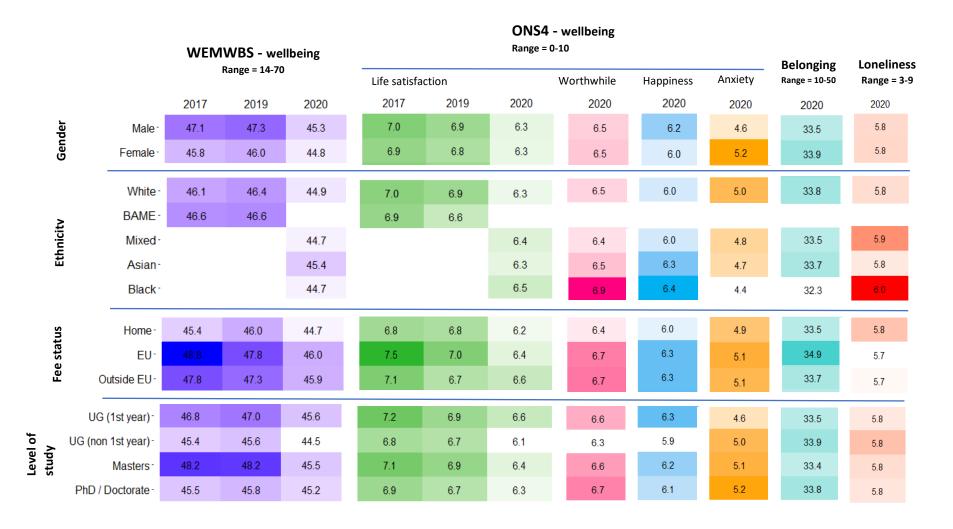
In 2019, being a PhD student was significantly associated with lower WEMWBS scores. In 2020, both PhD and masters students saw significantly lower life satisfaction and higher anxiety scores, compared with first year undergraduates, with masters students also having greater odds of not feeling part of community. However, there were no significant differences in sense of belonging or loneliness (UCLA-3 or the direct measure) by level of study, or in the amount of change seen between survey years, for any measures.

¹⁰ Linear (regression) models were produced for WEMWBS, each ONS4 item, loneliness (UCLA-3), and belonging, separately for each survey year, with all demographic variables as predictors. Each demographic category was contrasted against one reference category (e.g. for level of study, first year UGs were contrasted against non-first year UGs, masters students, and PhD students). Logistic regression models were produced for the wellbeing in transition, community, and loneliness (direct) measures, for each survey year, with all demographic variables as predictors. All noted results were significant at p < .05.

¹¹ Interaction terms (survey year x gender, survey year x ethnicity, survey year x fee status, and survey year x level of study) were added to the comparison-by-year ANOVA models in section 3.a: wellbeing by year. Significant interactions were followed up with Tukey comparison of means. Only significant interaction found was survey year x fee status for ONS4 life satisfaction, p = .045.

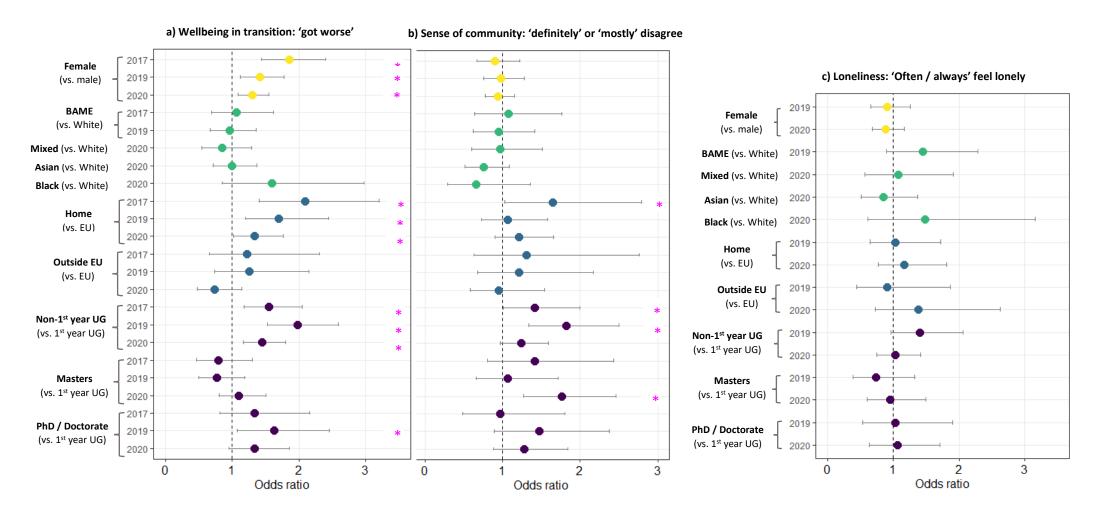
¹² This result is despite a higher WEMWBS score in 2017 for BAME students, and is due to the effects of controlling for the other demographic variables.

Figure 3c.1. Mean wellbeing (WEMWBS and ONS4), belonging, and loneliness (UCLA-3) by gender, ethnicity, fee status, and level of study.¹³ Darker colours represent higher scores. Significant associations between scores and demographic categories are noted above. See *Appendix Table 1* for sample sizes.



¹³ The ONS4 items 'worthwhile', happiness, and anxiety were not collected in 2017 or 2019. For ethnicity, the 'BAME' category comprises non-White ethnicities, and is used where specific ethnicity data was not available or not used to protect anonymity (2017 and 2019).

Figure 3c.2. Odds ratios for a) responding that wellbeing had 'got worse' since starting university, b) responding 'definitely disagree' or 'mostly disagree' with feeling part of a community of staff and students, and c) responding that they 'Often / always' feel lonely. Values above 1 (dashed line) indicate greater odds of these responses, and values below 1 indicate lower odds. Where the bars (95 % confidence intervals) completely to one side of the dashed line (denoted by pink asterisk), the result is significant.



4. Summary

The aims of this report were to:

- compare wellbeing by year across three University of Bath student surveys -in 2017, 2019, and 2020assessing whether there has been a change in wellbeing since the pandemic,
- explore the relationships between loneliness, belonging, and wellbeing in 2020, and
- compare wellbeing levels between demographic categories.

Wellbeing by year

Between 2017 and 2019 there were no significant differences in mental wellbeing (WEMWBS) or 'wellbeing in transition to university', and a very slight drop in life satisfaction and sense of community. This provides a relatively stable pre-pandemic baseline, in which:

- WEMWBS scores were in the 'average' category,
- life satisfaction scores were between 'medium' and 'high'.
- around a third indicated better wellbeing since starting university and a quarter indicated worse,
- a majority (62-66%) felt part of a community, and
- 10% indicated frequent loneliness (in 2019 only, as this was not measured in 2017).

There were large, significant changes for the worse in all five measures between 2019 and 2020 (WEMWBS, wellbeing in transition to university, life satisfaction, sense of community, and loneliness). Since there were not many changes between 2017 and 2019, we can be relatively confident that this large drop in 2020 was associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020:

- WEMWBS scores were on the border between the "average" and "possible depression/anxiety" categories.
- life satisfaction scores were 'medium',
- around a third indicated better wellbeing since starting university and 40 % indicated worse,
- a large minority (44%) felt part of a community, and
- 12% indicated frequent loneliness.

However, it is worth noting that University of Bath students indicated better wellbeing on the ONS4 (life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile, happiness, and anxiety) compared with a survey of the wider UK student population conducted by the Office for National Statistics in the same month (November).

Loneliness, belonging and wellbeing in 2020

In 2020, sense of belonging at university, and an additional scale of loneliness (UCLA-3) were measured. Higher belonging and lower levels of loneliness were both associated with higher wellbeing (WEMWBS). There was also evidence that the relationship between a sense of belonging at university and greater wellbeing could be partly, but not fully, statistically mediated (accounted for) by lower general loneliness.

Wellbeing by demographic group

Within each survey year, being a non-first year undergraduate, home student, or female were commonly associated with significantly lower wellbeing scores (WEMWBS and ONS4) or greater odds of responding that wellbeing had got worse since starting university, or that they didn't feel part of a community of staff and students. First year undergraduates, masters students, male students, and EU students tended to have the highest wellbeing scores. There were small and sometimes inconsistent differences by ethnicity for wellbeing.

Loneliness and sense of belonging at university saw very few significant differences between demographic groups, and there were similar drops in scores between 2019 and 2020 by demographic group for most measures.

5. References

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6. Appendix

Table 1. Sample sizes (frequency and percentage) by demographic group, for each survey year.

		2017 N = 1469		2019 N = 1759		2020 N = 2191	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Ethnicity	BAME	308	21.0	393	24.6		
	Mixed					101	4.6
	Asian					334	15.2
	Black					45	2.1
	White	1131	77.0	1326	75.4	1665	76.0
	Other ethnicities / missing data	30	2.0	40	2.3	46	2.1
Fee status	Home	1023	69.6	1215	69.1	1600	73.0
	EU	202	13.8	250	14.2	273	12.5
	Outside EU	230	15.7	272	15.5	288	13.1
	Missing data	14	1.0	22	1.3	30	1.4
Gender	Male	593	40.4	716	40.7	914	41.7
	Female	848	57.7	1016	57.8	1249	57.0
	Other genders / missing data	28	1.9	27	1.5	28	1.3
Level of study	UG (1st year)	481	32.7	538	30.6	575	26.2
	UG (non 1st year)	692	47.1	780	44.3	1067	48.7
	Masters	176	12.0	258	14.7	317	14.5
	PhD / Doctorate	116	7.9	174	9.9	228	10.4
	Other years / missing data	4	0.3	9	0.5	4	0.2