

A group of graduates in caps and gowns are walking up a set of stairs, holding diplomas. The background shows a building and some greenery.

Higher Education Snapshot

Student Welfare

May 2019 – May 2021

Key Takeaways From The Higher Education Sector

Student wellbeing topics have accounted for 0.6% of Higher Education coverage over the last two years. Although it was not a widely discussed topic, on average, coverage on student welfare increased during the pandemic, with 74% of coverage published after March 2020, and peaked at the start of the 2020 academic year.

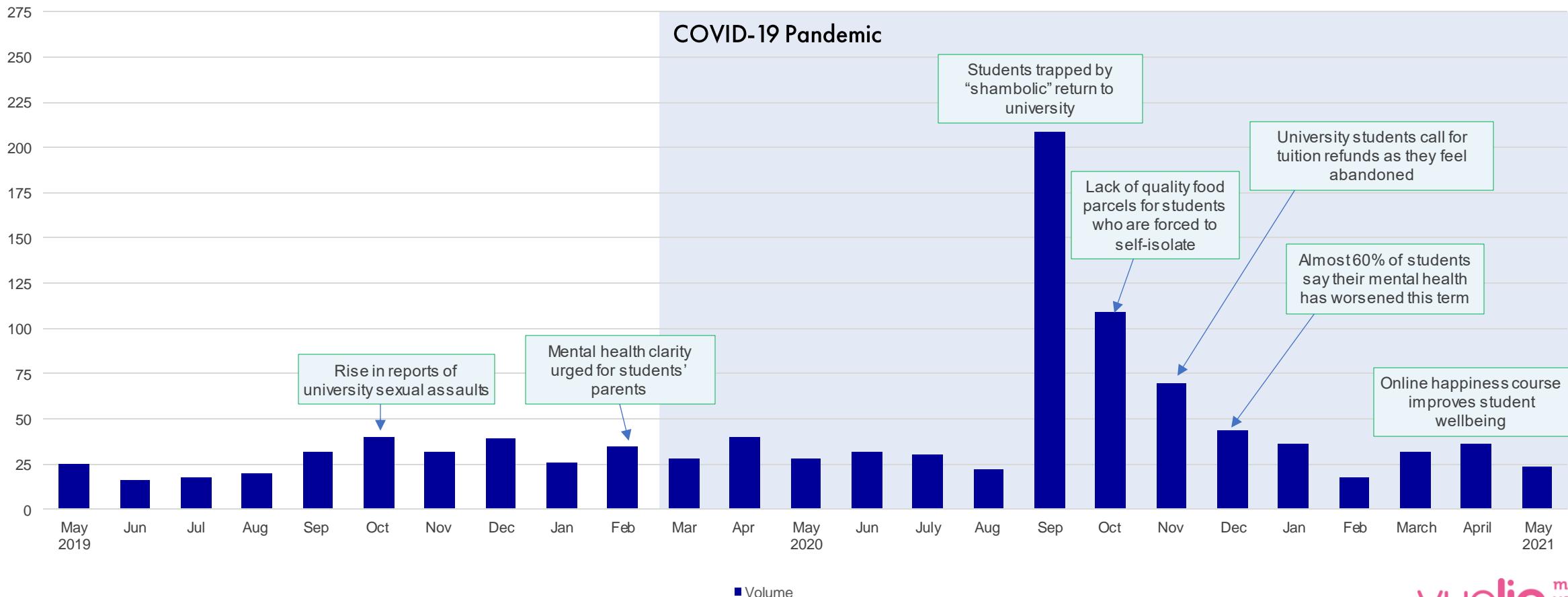
Prior to Covid-19, coverage was often in response to student suicides – with 65% of all coverage published before March 2020 containing the theme “suicide”.

Although visibility was high during September and October 2020, with 30% of all student wellbeing coverage being between this period, conversation was mostly negative as students felt abandoned upon their return to university.

Initiatives to help students’ welfare were positively received in the media, including the University of Bristol’s emergency alert protocol and the Office For Students’ online support platform, StudentSpace.

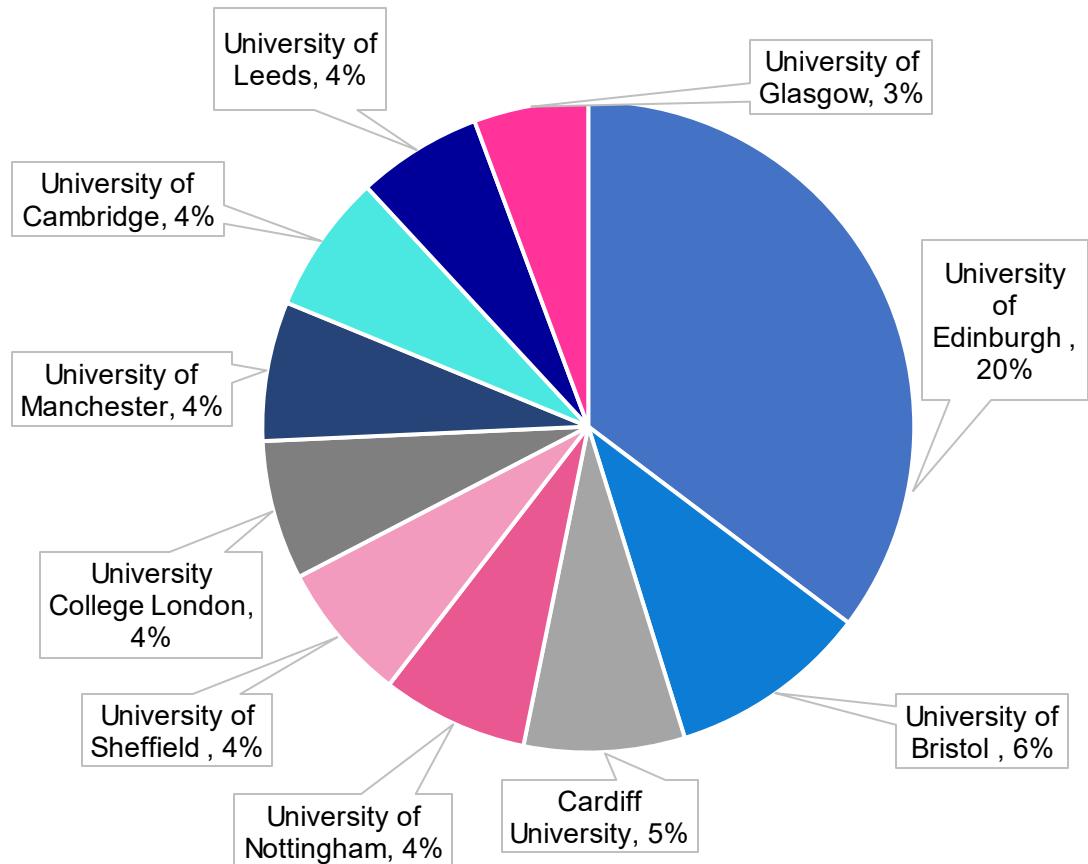
Student Welfare Discussion Over Time

- Research has shown the Coronavirus pandemic led to a surge in mental health problems; particularly among the student population. Before the outbreak of Covid-19, media touched on universities' discussion around the importance of mental health, however, this was usually in response to student suicides or the delay it took to get professional help as students were "not being adequately assessed" (BBC News, 16.05.19).
- Coverage significantly increased at the beginning of the academic year in 2020 as students returned to university amid the pandemic. September and October accounted for 30% of all coverage, which discussed the dynamics between university students' mental health and the lack of support universities were providing, specifically in regards to accommodation costs, as students were anxious about their financial wellbeing after finding out "that most of their courses would be online after paying hundreds of pounds for student housing" (BBC News, 08.09.20).



Top Universities' Coverage

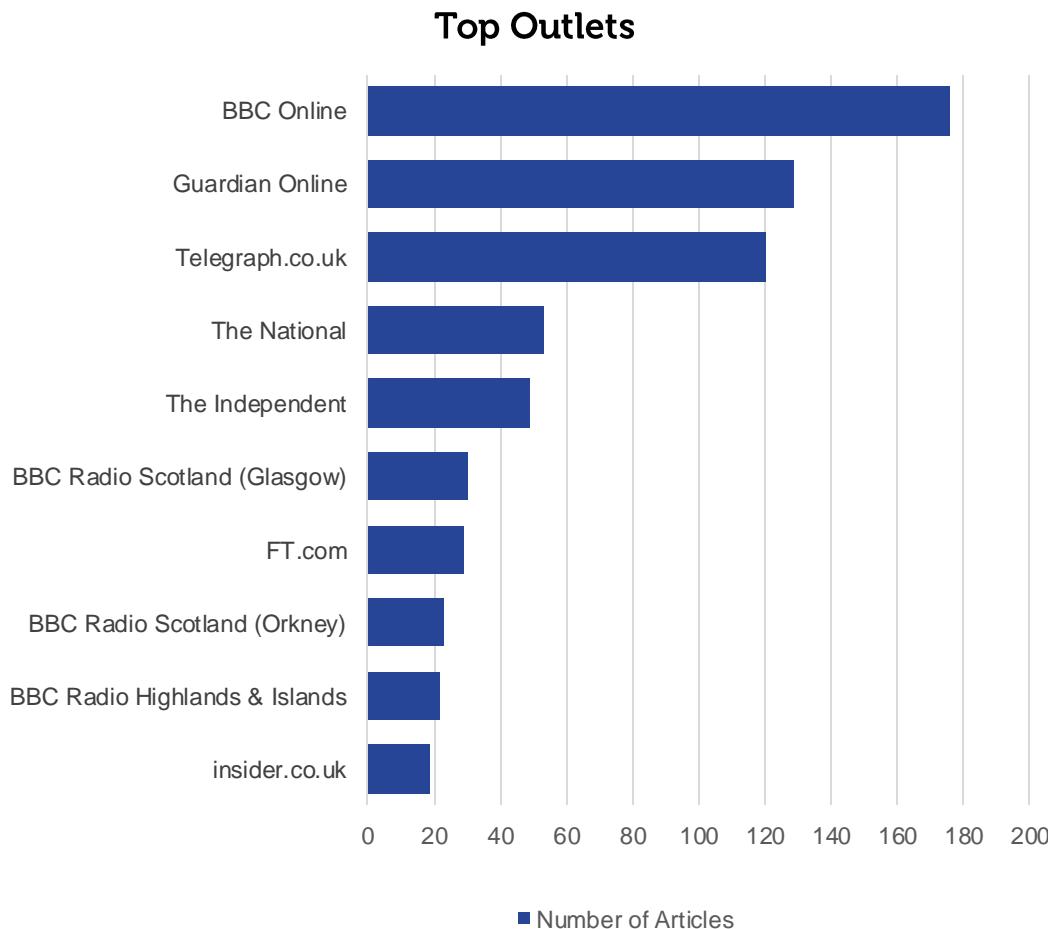
SoV Top 10 Universities Coverage*



- **University of Edinburgh** – before the pandemic, the university was criticised along with 13 other Scottish institutions, as it failed to accurately record student suicide rates. Coverage began to pick up during lockdown in September 2020, after “inhumane” laws banned students from going home”, and quarantined students feared they would go hungry (*The Independent*, 25.09.20).
- **University of Bristol** – coverage was high following the deaths of Natasha Abrahart in 2018 and Maria Stancliffe-Cook in August 2019. High suicide rates at the university urged students to speak up and as a result, a happiness course was established to improve wellbeing, with the most recent coverage on this being published in April 2021.
- **Cardiff University** – coverage included: complaints after an anti-abortion protest took place outside the university, whilst more recently, after the disappearance of Sarah Everard, the university football team set up a chaperoning initiative to make women feel safer when walking alone at night.
- **University of Nottingham** – after the death of George Floyd, the university offered extenuating circumstances to students who felt their work had suffered as a result of the traumatic experience. Negative coverage discussed the problems with food parcels for students in isolation, as some students had meals missing.
- **University of Sheffield** – coverage included the university’s research on the connection between food insecurity among students and the pandemic, as well as student interviews about whether to stay in the city or go home for Christmas.
- **University College London** – coverage included research from the university that showed a link between high levels of depression and sedentary behaviour. Coverage was mostly positive, as it was described as a “sanctuary” for students during the pandemic (*The Independent*, 10.01.21).
- **University of Manchester** – a high amount of coverage occurred in November 2020, after students “went on a rampage” as they were concerned about the impact barrier fences would have on their mental health (*Khaleej Times*, 06.11.20).
- **University of Cambridge** – Negative coverage surrounding the Coronavirus and students’ wellbeing was high, as students called for final-year retakes, and were told they “would not be able to graduate if they left during lockdown” (*The Telegraph*, 03.11.20).
- **University of Leeds** – coverage was mixed, as one student described the mental health support as “vital”, however another article discussed the suicide of a Leeds University student; with her dad urging people to speak up (*BBC News*, 24.09.19).
- **University of Glasgow** – coverage was high in September 2020, after 172 students tested positive for Covid-19 and had to isolate, with them comparing university to a “prison with an extortionate rent” (*The Telegraph*, 25.09.20).

Top Outlets

- The *BBC Online* was the outlet that provided the most articles where universities and student wellbeing were mentioned. It frequently discussed the University of Bristol, after 12 of its students had committed suicide in three years.
- The Guardian* had the second highest visibility, and it often mentioned University College London due to the amount of studies it was involved with.
- Scottish radio stations were also very noticeable, as students were particularly struggling there due to harsher lockdown restrictions, and this was also frequently discussed by the *Telegraph.co.uk*.



BBC NEWS

“Students encouraged to talk about mental health issues”

[bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk), 17 September 2020

**The
Guardian**

“Student who killed herself was ‘failed’ by mental health services”

theguardian.com, 20 September 2019

INDEPENDENT

“Majority of students ‘well looked-after’ during self-isolation says Universities UK president”

theindependent.co.uk, 6 October 2020

**The
Telegraph**

“Universities should be seeking to help, not punish, students stuck in lockdown”.

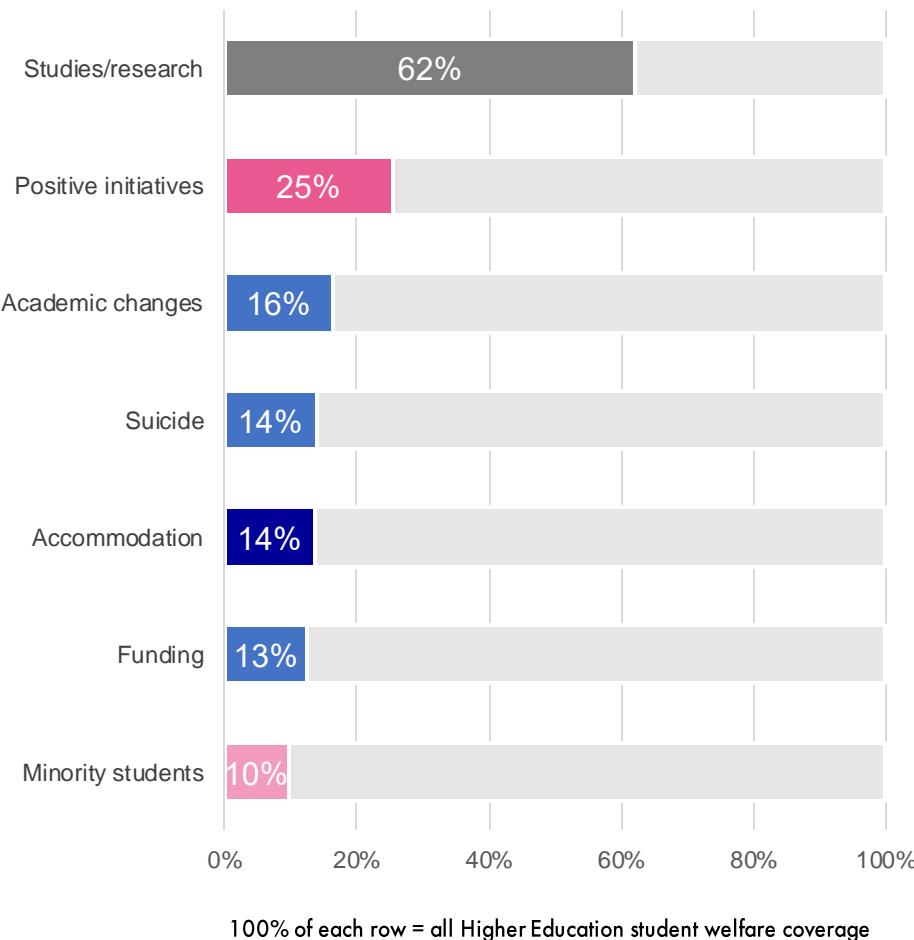
telegraph.co.uk, 30 September 2020

sky NEWS

“Coronavirus: University students face ‘anxiety, isolation and loneliness’ due to COVID-19”

news.sky.com, 14 August 2020

Top Themes



Studies/research

Studies and research appeared in almost two thirds of Higher Education coverage. University College London had the highest share of voice as they conducted several studies including: the link between low levels of physical activity and depression among young people, the Lockdown Dreams project to see how sleeping patterns have changed during the pandemic, and the difference in adherence to lockdown restrictions between generations.

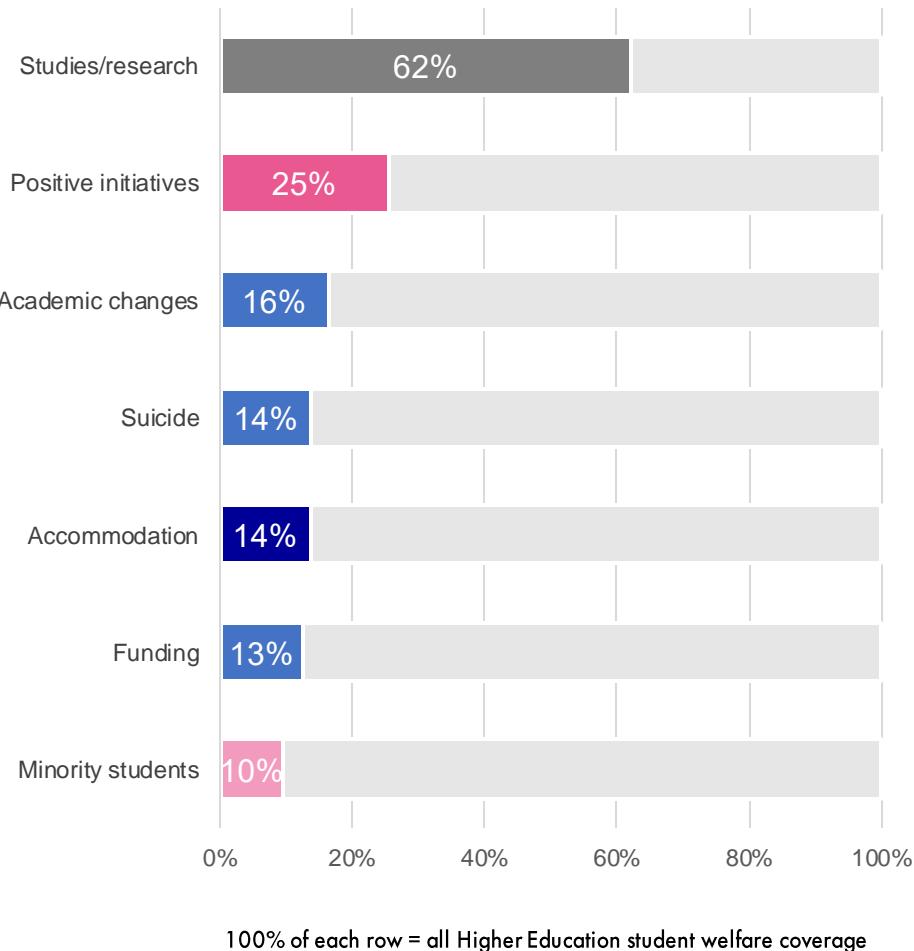
Positive Initiatives

After the May 2019 inquest into the death of Bristol University student, Natasha Abrahart, universities urged young people to speak up. Many media outlets commented on the rising interest in online counselling and helplines, as “calls doubled”, and coverage on this continued to increase after the pandemic (*The Telegraph*, 04.03.21). In June 2020, the Office for Students announced a new £3m online platform, Student Space, to provide mental health support to students in the pandemic, however it was reported that it was not widely used. Media also criticised the government, as universities were “abandoned to fight Covid alone” (*The Guardian*, 14.09.20).

Academic Changes

During the Coronavirus pandemic, teaching became online and therefore, students were struggling with less contact time, cancelled exams and anxiety surrounding their grades. This led to a surge in coverage discussing the “rise in students asking to repeat the year after campus lockdown” (*The Guardian*, 18.04.21). Some positive coverage did occur however, as Oxford University created a new degree class for students who were unable to take exams because of the virus.

Top Themes



Accommodation

Coverage focused on the struggle students faced as they paid for campus lodgings despite teaching being remote; they were offered “food, but no financial support” (*The Guardian*, 06.10.20). High-reaching national media outlets focused on rent strikes that were taking place and the distress that financial worries were causing students. In addition to this, media also discussed protests at Manchester University, after students “woke up to find they were surrounded by fencing” during lockdown (*The Independent*, 07.11.20).

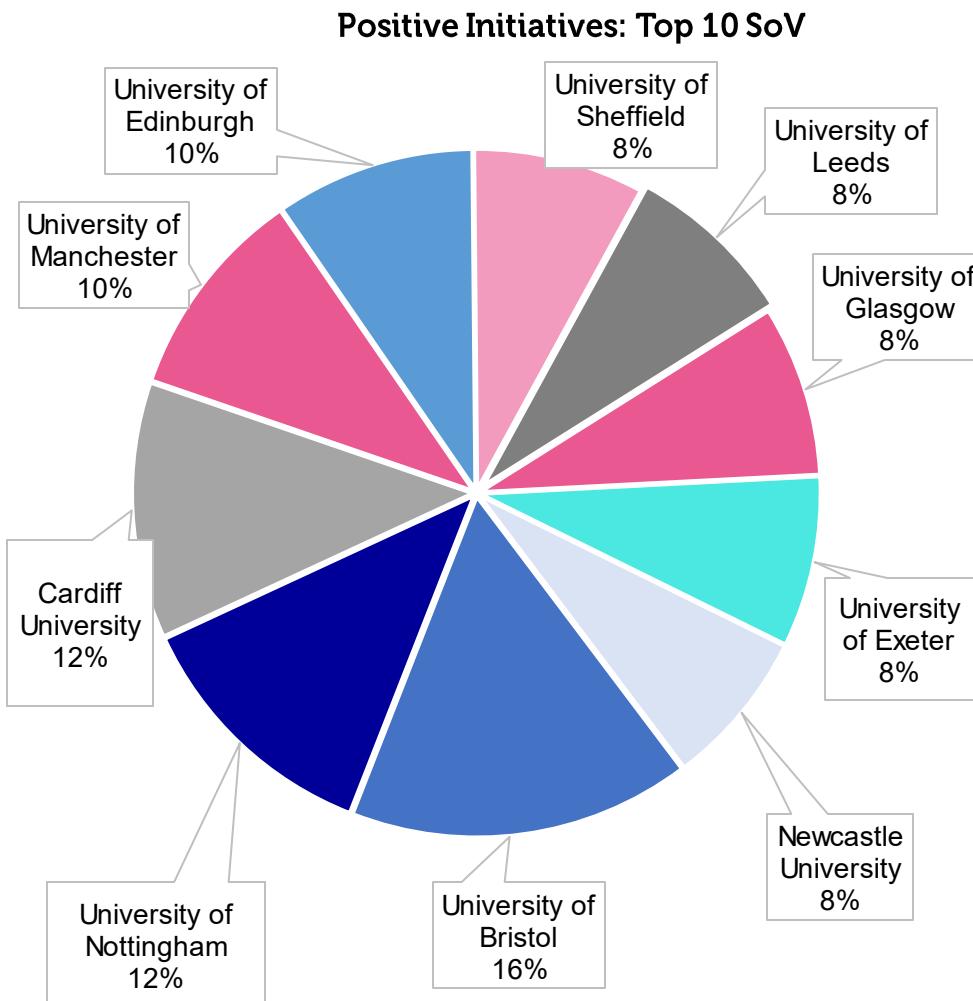
Funding

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, “one in five students had a mental health diagnosis” and there were not enough counsellors at campuses (*BBC Online*, 27.02.20). Coverage tended to focus on the mental health crisis of university students and staff, and this was exacerbated after the pandemic. This drew attention to the lack of funding for mental health services, and when student wellbeing was in the spotlight, it was often discussed alongside future investment plans. Before the pandemic in February 2021, the government announced it would contribute £70m for mental health services and students facing hardships.

Minority Students

Once the pandemic hit, news outlets began to comment on the support universities were providing students from minority groups. Although some coverage described online lectures as “removing the stigma” for disabled students, most publications highlighted that they were losing out, as they were unable to access extra equipment and gain suitable deadline extensions (*The Guardian* 03.06.20). A significant number of students were also impacted by digital poverty, as one third were unable to access learning during lockdown, with the most disadvantaged students being affected the most. Coverage also highlighted that there are wellbeing issues for BAME students, especially considering the high impact of Covid-19 on their communities. Additionally, international students were unable to return home throughout the pandemic, and homeless students had nowhere to go; this isolation and lack of support was one of the reasons behind the rent strike, and featured in a range of coverage.

Positive Initiatives



Positive initiatives were visible in 17% of Higher Education's total coverage on student welfare, with the University of Bristol being the main focus, and the *Guardian Online* discussing these schemes the most. News stories touched on its high suicide rates and the initiatives that have been implemented as a result, including its suicide prevention scheme. In addition to this, the University of Bristol offer an emergency alert protocol, which "94% of students have signed up to", and allows the university to contact a nominated person if there is serious concern for a student (*BBC News*, 06.08.19).

Other universities offered extra support, particularly throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, as many students suffered from loneliness. Research shows that spending time with animals can "alleviate worry and provide comfort", and as a result, on World Mental Health Day, Newcastle University introduced a scheme where students could walk Bessie, the Jack Russell, for one hour per week (*BBC News*, 10.10.19). King's College London also offered Doggy De-stress days during its wellbeing weeks, however, students have said that more practical changes, including deadline extensions, would be more useful.

University of West London gained some coverage in the *Guardian Online*, as it provided weekly fruit and vegetable parcels to students who were isolating, whilst University College London offered wellbeing workshops. Financial support was lacking overall, however, Manchester Metropolitan University did offer a two week rent rebate and £50 food vouchers to students.

Apps proved to be successful too, as they "encouraged students to take control of their wellbeing in their own time" via a way of communicating that feels safer; especially for students with social anxiety and autism (*The Guardian*, 27.02.20). University of East Anglia have two apps: OpenUpUEA, for wellbeing, and Enlitened, for academic support. Coverage surrounding these apps was positive overall, however, some students found them patronising, as in-person support was essential, yet unavailable.

The Office for Students provided a £3million platform, Student Space, to offer mental health support to students who needed it. This was to be used in conjunction with in-person university support services, such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, however the benefits were not as expected with only "100 students a month using Student Space" (*The Guardian*, 21.12.20).

Coverage Breakdown

Subject	This study analyses the visibility of student welfare within Higher Education coverage; specifically, before and after the pandemic. The study analyses a key sample of print, online and broadcast publications, to identify key trends.
Period	May 2019 – May 2021
Markets	Global
Media	Print, Online and Broadcast
Notes	Positive initiatives based on online and print only. SoV based on online, print and broadcast national and international media. Weighting based on volume of articles.

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