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Higher education student motivations for extracurricular activities: evidence from UK universities

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ABSTRACT

Higher education students are required to demonstrate value beyond their curricula achievements to secure jobs in increasingly competitive labour markets. Focusing on extracurricular activities as one-way students can do so, this paper uses a motivation perspective to examine what drives students to engage in extracurricular activities, and how student motivation varies between early and late-stage students. We conducted 46 in-depth interviews with students in a post-92 widening-participation university and found that four motivations – extrinsic, intrinsic, social, and pro-social – explained extracurricular participation. The motivations varied across types of extracurricular activities; extrinsic motivation was prominent for employment, academic, society and volunteering extracurriculars; intrinsic and social motivations were vital for sports and societies; and pro-social motivation for academic, volunteering, and society extracurriculars. Moreover, we found important differences between the motivations of early-year and final-year students, suggesting that motivations vary across the university journey. Our paper contributes to the literature on extracurricular activities within higher education by providing new evidence on the motivations that propel students to engage in (different) activities in the current marketised higher education environment and by identifying the level of study as an important boundary condition shaping motivations for extracurricular participation.

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Extracurricular activities; motivation; employability; UK higher education; skill development

1 Introduction

U.K. higher education (HE) policy has shifted towards employability. Longer-term student employment outcomes (e.g. obtaining a graduate position and post-study earnings) are increasingly central metrics by which universities are evaluated (Christie 2017). The highly competitive job market makes it difficult for students to stand out and obtain graduate positions, however (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). In response, universities have focused on equipping students with the employability skills demanded by business. Following employer lists of the skills sought, universities have primarily focused on teamwork, communication, leadership, and problem-solving (Clark et al. 2015).[1] Despite this, modalities for enhancing these student employability skills remain unclear (Pegg et al. 2012).

Research and university efforts have mainly focused on embedding employability skills within the curriculum and enhancing employability programmes (Bonnard 2020). For instance, small group teaching (Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020), work experience, and employer involvement in curriculum design (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009) may aid student employability skills. While the

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curriculum appears important, it is only part of a broad and holistic university experience. Alone, it does not appear sufficient, as research and stakeholders highlight that universities are not yet delivering graduates with the employability skills desired by employers (CBI 2017; OFS 2019).

Extracurricular activities (henceforth, extracurriculars) are a central feature of the university experience that transcend the curriculum. Extracurriculars refer to activities, hobbies, and employment that are not directly part of academic studies, and which can be associated with the university or other external organisations (Thompson et al. 2013). While extracurriculars in HE has generally received limited research attention (Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott 2010; Griffiths, Dickinson, and Day 2021; Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021), research suggests that extracurriculars offer practical learning experiences and developmental opportunities that can enhance student employability skills. In turn, helping them thrive in the labour market, as well as improving their university experience, social networks, physical and psychological wellbeing, citizenship activities, and resilience (Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin 2002; Seow and Pan 2014; Clark et al. 2015; Kim and Bastedo 2017). UK student engagement in extracurriculars is significant and represents a valuable option for enhancing student employability – recent estimates suggest that approximately half of U. K. university students participate in sports, societies, and employment (54% and 56%), and 27% in volunteering (Neves 2018, 2020). It is however important to note that it may not be suitable for all students as many face time, location, and monetary barriers to extracurricular engagement (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021).

Given the crucial benefits of extracurriculars for universities, students, and employers, what is urgently needed is research on understanding why students engage in extracurriculars. While limited work has provided some insight into the factors (e.g. future-orientation, fun) propelling students to engage in extracurriculars (Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott 2010; Stevenson and Clegg 2012; Roulin and Bangerter 2013), significant environmental shifts have occurred with HE since that may alter conclusions on the factors underpinning student extracurricular participation. For instance, where earlier work suggested a central role for intrinsic motivations, the marketisation of UK HE and changes in its funding structure in the last decade may have shifted students towards more extrinsic explanations for participation. Equally, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework may have improved the ability of students to develop employability skills via the curriculum, and in turn, reduced motivation to engage in extracurriculars for employability motives. So, it is critical and timely to further examine the factors propelling students to engage in extracurriculars and shed new and contemporary light on this important question.

We adopt a motivational perspective to examine what propels students to engage in extracurriculars (Griffiths, Dickinson, and Day 2021). Extracurriculars are self-initiated student behaviours, where they voluntarily engage with no performance obligation. The pursuit of goals primarily drives self-initiated behaviours. Botvinick and Braver (2015) describe motivation as the orienting and invigorating impact of pursuing prospective goals on behaviour and cognition. Evidence supports the view of motivation as a predictor of self-initiated student behaviours (Griffiths, Dickinson, and Day 2021), such as in study continuity and learning and feedback engagement (Janke 2020), as well as in a range of voluntary behaviours outside of HE, such as volunteering and sports (Duda 2005). This influence stems from motivation reflecting the goals that individuals desire and shaping their disposition and efforts to engage in goal-oriented behaviours to fulfil them (Locke and Latham 2004). Thus, we argue a motivation perspective will provide important insights into why students engage in (certain) extracurriculars that universities can use to develop strategies to support extracurricular engagement among U.K. students. Our central research question is: how does motivation impact student engagement in extracurriculars?

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were traditionally distinguished in the literature (Deci and Ryan 1985). Intrinsic motivation reflects individuals engaging for their interest and enjoyment, while extrinsic motivation reflects engagement to obtain rewards, benefits, or comply with rules (Ryan and Deci 2020). More recent work has also distinguished the importance of social and pro-social motivations in shaping individual behaviour (Table 1). Distinct motivations should compel different

Table 1. Types of motivation.

Types of Motivation	Explanation
Extrinsic	Engagement because they anticipate benefits (e.g. skill development) or rewards (e.g. monetary gain) from participation.
Intrinsic	Engagement because of their passion, interest, or pursuit of enjoyment.
Social	Engagement in pursuit of socialising, meeting new people, and making friends.
Pro-Social	Engagement to benefit others and give back.

behaviours and levels of engagement in or achievement from the same behaviour (Deci and Ryan 2000). For instance, while both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations may induce behaviour, extrinsic motivations associate with more limited and shallow engagement that may hinder the learning and development required for students to benefit. Whereas the passion and interest embedded in intrinsic motivations often lead to more intense and learning-oriented engagements that facilitate skill development (Froiland and Worrell 2016; Janke 2020).

We further argue that the motivational drivers of extracurricular participation are shaped by context (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021). Unlike prior work that has examined context through extracurricular type, gender, race, and class (Stevenson and Clegg 2012; Roulin and Bangerter 2013), we shift focus to the university journey. Specifically, we propose that student goals often vary throughout their time at university. In the early years of study (years 1 and 2), students are typically focused on making the significant adjustment to HE, making friends and developing a social life alongside their academic studies. Whereas, in the final year of study, the social side of university is often less emphasised. Students shift more focus to their studies, developing their employability skills and securing a graduate job or further study (Marris 2018). These variations in goals suggest that distinct motivations for extracurricular engagement likely activate for early and late-stage students. Prior work fails to account for the role of the university journey however, as it mostly focused on the factors underpinning second year student extracurricular engagement (Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott 2010; Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012). Thus, an additional research question is: how does student motivation for extracurriculars vary between early- and late-stage students?

2 Method

As extracurricular engagement and motivations should be context-dependent and subjective (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021), we adopted an inductive qualitative case study approach due to its ontological fit and ability to answer our research questions. We used a case study of an urban U.K. university with large numbers of students from widening participation backgrounds. We chose this site as it had been heavily shaped by the institutional environmental shifts within U.K. HE in the last decade. It has experienced rapid student growth and institutional development during that period. Equally, the institution has been placing significant emphasis on enhancing student employability in their goals and has invested in their extracurriculars. We obtained ethical approval from the Faculty of Business and Law Ethics Committee (De Montfort University). Prior to collecting data, we worked with university and student union officials involved in the organisation of extracurriculars to obtain a better understanding of the phenomena and guidance on successful recruitment strategies (Souitaris, Zerbinati, and Liu 2012).

We used a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling to identify interview participants engaged with extracurriculars during their studies. These approaches enabled us to identify participants who could readily draw on their subjective experience of their extracurricular motivations to answer our research questions, while at the same time, enabling us to reach a critical mass of participants. We chose not to include students not engaged in extracurriculars for two reasons. First, such students may not have actively considered engaging in extracurriculars and thus, may not possess readily available subjective experiences to draw upon to answer our research questions.

Second, our goal was to develop a rich theoretical account of student extracurricular motivations (Graebner, Martin, and Roundy 2012). As such, we narrowed our criteria to only those engaged in extracurriculars to facilitate the development of deeper and focused understandings of the phenomena.

We adopted a multi-pronged recruitment approach to maximise participant recruitment. First, we invited students we knew met our inclusion criteria through our academic roles. Second, we emailed invitations to university societies, sports teams and course representatives listed on the student union website. Third, we had a programme leader for a large business school programme disseminate study information and invitations to students. Fourth, university and student union officials involved with extracurriculars communicated study information and invitations to prospective participants. Finally, we asked participants to invite their peers and extracurricular members who met the inclusion criteria to participate. Following Thompson et al. (2013), we included examples of extracurriculars, such as part-time working, society membership, and course representation, in the participant invitation and information sheet. To all participants it was emphasised that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any point, without a reason.

Data collection occurred in early 2020, just prior to the U.K. coronavirus crisis. We utilised semi-structured interviews that enabled us to direct interviewees towards factors explaining participation in extracurriculars while also allowing for emergent themes. We developed the semi-structured interview schedule using the literature and expert input from students, university and student union officials involved in extracurriculars. Interviews were conducted in two stages; first, we used a background information sheet to collect data on gender, age, student status, parental higher education history, faculty, and academic year, amongst other information. The information sheet also captured data on engagement in a broad range of extracurriculars. Following this, the interviews explored engagement levels, experiences, reasons for engaging in (different) extracurriculars, balancing of extracurriculars with studies, and student perceptions of the benefits. We utilised probes to enable the respondents to develop their responses and obtain greater depth in the data. We conducted 46 interviews in total. This sample size was guided by theoretical saturation and sample sizes of previous comparable studies (Clark et al. 2015; Stevenson and Clegg 2012). All interviews were audio-recorded – with participant consent – for verbatim transcription, and the interviewers took notes during and after the interviews (Eisenhardt 1989). The average interview duration was around 46 minutes. A professional transcription service transcribed the interviews. The interviews produced 710 pages of data.

We adopted a thematic approach to identify key patterns and themes in our data. We proceeded in two steps based on established techniques, with the investigative process and data structure shown in Figure 1. Interview data were first examined by two authors using open coding to better understand the reasons for extracurricular engagement. Both authors coded common statements and themes independently, one manually and one using NVivo, to identify provisional first-order data categories and ensure reliability. Differences in emergent themes were noted and extensively discussed until the authors reached agreement. We consolidated the first-order themes into more abstract and theoretical second-order categories by comparing our first-order categories to extant literature (Souitaris, Zerbinati, and Liu 2012). For example, we noticed the statements 'experience', 'skills', and 'money' as motivations for extracurricular engagement reflected the broader theoretical concept of extrinsic motivation.

Table 2 shows an overview of respondents. Most respondents identified as female (60.87%). In line with the composition of UK HE, a significant minority identified as mature (28.26%) or international (23.91%) students. Around a third (34.78%) were the first in their family to attend HE, in line with the growing focus on widening participation. Half of participants studied in business and law, and around a quarter (26.08%) in art, design, or humanities. Finally, around a third of our participants were in the second (32.60%) or third (36.95%) years of study. A small number were in their first year or postgraduate, and one participant had recently graduated from the institution.

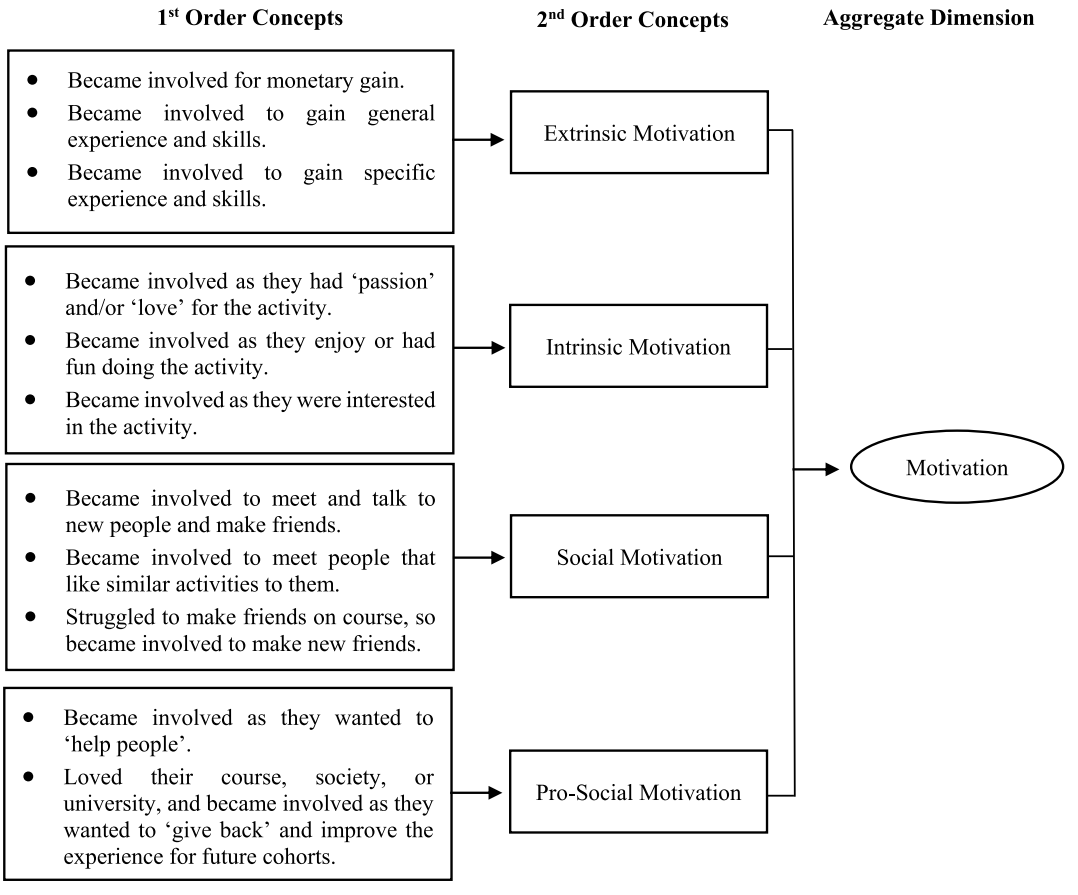

Figure 1. Thematic categorisation of the data with indicative comments.

3 Findings

We identified four motivation types in our data (extrinsic, intrinsic, social, and pro-social) that explained extracurricular choices. We present our results by illustrating the key findings with quotes in text and then providing additional evidence in a supporting table (Table 3). Motivations were often multi-faceted. For instance, in discussing their motivation for becoming a course representative, participant 37 noted, 'because I want to improve my communications skills, I want to get to know people, I want to improve my CV and I think it's a nice thing to do'. Here, the student highlights aspects of extrinsic, social and pro-social motivation, explaining their participation. For ease, however, we discuss and present the evidence on each motivation separately in turn. The themes are presented alphabetically.

3.1 Extrinsic motivation

We found two facets of extrinsic motivation explaining student extracurricular participation. The first was monetary gain, but this motivation was mostly confined to employment extracurriculars (some cases paid academic extracurriculars) due to most other types being unpaid. Attending and engaging in university can impose high costs on students – e.g. accommodation, study, and socialising costs – and some financial support has been removed in recent years or converted to loans. Employment thus provides an opportunity for students to meet these additional costs. As participant

Table 2. Respondent profile.

Gender	
Male	39.13%
Female	60.87%
Mature Student	
Yes	28.26%
No	71.73%
International Student	
Yes	23.91%
No	76.08%
First in Family to Attend Higher Education	
Yes	34.78%
No	65.21%
Study Area	
Art, Design and Humanities	26.08%
Business and Law	50%
Computing, Engineering and Media	8.69%
Health and Life Sciences	15.21%
Year of Study	
First	13.04%
Second	32.60%
Third	36.95%
PG or Recent Graduate	17.39%

Table 3. Motivations explaining extracurricular engagement.

Type of motivation	Extracurricular type
Extrinsic	Employment
Monetary gain	
'yeah, I think I've got like a lot of financial support from family, so I don't like to rely on them, so I wanted my own income'. (Participant 24, Job)	
Gaining General Experience and Skills	Employment Academic Volunteering Societies
'it kind of looks good on your CV so it's a bit of a stand out point if you were going up against someone for a job who wasn't a course rep. If it was like down to little things you've kind of got that edge' (Participant 24, Course Representative)	
'I think there's a lot of transferable skills that I thought were valuable to take from that position' (Participant 10, Student Ambassador).	
Gaining Specific Experience and Skills	Employment Academic Volunteering
'that would look really good if I were to work for a magazine company or a publishers, or something to show physical proof' (Participant 45, Society Magazine).	
Intrinsic	Sports Societies
'it was fun' (Participant 6, Student Board).	
'I love playing football so as soon as I came to university that was the first thing that I, that I kind of like I had to find it which was football, where I could play football in [city]' (Participant 2, Sport)	
'I really enjoy theatre and drama' (Participant 32, Theatre Society)	
Social	Sports Societies
'So, I feel like I could bring together different friends and different groups and integrate them better. It helps everyone like make new friendships which helps everyone with the course because we all have to do collaborations and group work. And then when first years come next year they won't, it won't be as hard for them because they'll be able to join a society straightaway, get to know people'. (Participant 11, Setting up a Society)	
'to have that community of people that you can go' (Participant 21, Society Student Choir)	
'I intended it to be quite a social aspect' (Participant 19, Sport)	
Pro-Social Motivation	Academic Volunteering Society
'I wanted to give back a bit yeah definitely' . . . 'because that would encourage people who come here to definitely consider it as a uni'. (Participant 9, Job – Student Ambassador)	
'I suppose a bit of it was financial, but it was more err out of just a love for my course' (Participant 10, Student Ambassador)	
'obviously I do want to help people if there are problems within the course which was a reason that I also wanted to put myself forward' (Participant 22, Course Representative)	

32 notes 'it was also obviously to get money at that time [laugh] because I was poor'. Similarly, participant 11 noted 'I got [work] when I started at uni, a couple of months in because I was running out of money', and participant 17 concurred 'I'm an independent student so I have to cover all my expenses by myself'. The prevalence of this motivation and employment in our data is consistent with Neves (2016) finding that students in post-1992 institutions are significantly more likely to be working alongside their studies for money.

The second reason was to gain experience and skills linked to enhancing employability. The majority of students spoke about gaining experience and skills generally when discussing their extracurricular motivations. This was commonly expressed in a superficial manner as 'looking good on the CV', for example, participants 33 and 24 noted 'I just want to get a good title on my CV' and 'I think it looks good on your CV' when discussing motivations for course representative and employment extracurriculars. Some were more explicit in identifying extracurriculars to differentiate themselves in the labour market. On their motivation for setting up a society, participant 11 states 'because we're all doing the exact same course and we're all going to get probably very similar grades. So in terms of employability, I'm more employable if I've got more things under my belt that's the way I look at it'.

This reflects a strategic awareness that extracurriculars may communicate additional value to future appraisers (e.g. employers), hence the choice to participate in anticipation of future benefits. Some participants explicitly noted that their extracurriculars provide 'physical proof' of their skills to employers (participant 45, society), and that in an increasingly competitive labour market, help them to stand out, 'be more visible for employers', and have an 'easier life' after graduation (participant 17, course representative and employment). This aspect of extrinsic motivation was more widespread than monetary gain with students engaging in employment, academic activities (e.g. course representative), volunteering, and societies, highlighting the importance of gaining experience as a motivation for extracurriculars. Students may also view some extracurriculars as possessing greater employability value than others (Stevenson and Clegg 2011; Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021) as exemplified by participant 7:

> 'there's also a definitely like an employability side to it in that the law society does sound a bit more like something that shines out on your CV rather than music society. So I definitely thought like, ok, maybe this might be good as well from an employability standpoint. … I think [law society stands out more] because it's an academic based society, it kind of shows not just a commitment to your studies but a commitment to your future' (participant 7, societies)

This suggests that the 'nature' of extracurriculars may influence the perceived employability benefit. Those with a (perceived) academic (e.g. academic-based societies) and professional (e.g. employment) focus may be perceived as being more 'employable'. As participant 24 notes; 'I think it shows a dedication to what you want to do. I think it shows like if you got the job, you'd put in the extra effort with them like you have done with uni[versity]'. Within the extracurriculars perceived to have greater 'employability value', some students indicated barriers to engaging in employment due to a lack of prior experience. Instead, they had engaged in academic and volunteering extracurriculars to gain experience and skills due to the lower entry barriers. Participant 19 (volunteering) notes that they were seeking placement opportunities and had become involved in volunteering to obtain experience and skills to support their placement application because of its easier access. Participant 36 similarly noted that the intensity of their international education had prevented engagement in previous employment. In turn, this inhibited their current efforts to obtain employment and a placement to acquire experience and skills. They thus engaged in 'anything [they] can do … so that [they] can do a placement', namely, becoming a course representative due to low entry barriers.

While most students spoke about gaining experience and skills for a general 'skill and experience bump', a smaller proportion were more focused on the pursuit of specific skills and experience. For example, participant 8, when probed on their reasoning for engaging in employment, noted they wanted to gain specific skills of 'facing people, obviously just having a job and working in that sort of

environment, getting used to working with others'. Notably, the specific skills students were motivated to acquire in their extracurriculars were predominately interpersonal (e.g. 'mostly talking to people skill, presenting your ideas, sharing what you think, responding to other people' participant 36, course representative). Some students also focused on obtaining experiences they believed were aligned to and would enhance their opportunities for specific future career paths. As participant 42 states, 'I wanted to go into something that could help me in the future. So, as I said working with different types of children and learning how to manage different types of children is going to be important in the field that I want to go into. So, getting experience in that is what's important for me'. However, for some students, while they recognised the value of extracurriculars for gaining experience and skills, this was not the ex-ante motivation, but an unintended benefit:

> 'I never really thought about it in that way. Definitely now I've been in the role like 6 months, I definitely think it has helped because I've had to do agendas, deal with people's complaints, negotiation with different teams, talk to coaches of different sports. But at the time I didn't really think about employability' (participant 9, sports society)

3.2 Intrinsic motivation

A significant number of students displayed intrinsic motivations in explaining engagement in extracurriculars. Students referenced both the enjoyment (e.g. 'I'd played a bit on holiday like every, like most people have and just enjoyed it and thought I'd give it a go' (participant 8, sport society) and 'I do things because I enjoy doing them' (participant 14, games societies)) and interest (e.g. 'I've been quite keen on music and I've had quite like a natural flare for it' (participant 7, arts, drama and music) and 'it was very interesting for me to learn about the different styles and how we could change things' (participant 40, academic extracurricular) components. Intrinsic motivation was strongly visible as the motivation for engagement in sports and societies, likely due to their significant emphasis on socialising and enjoyment, and the ability of students to strongly match their interest with their choice of activity. In many cases where students noted intrinsic motivation, they had engaged in these activities prior to university and chosen to continue the activities at university that they enjoyed and were interested in previously. As participant 21 notes in discussing their engagement in the student choir society:

> I love to sing that's one thing I like to do and I've been doing it even before I came to [University] so I was just looking for an avenue to you know express myself

3.3 Prosocial motivation

We found a high prevalence of pro-social motivation in student reasons for extracurriculars, particularly for volunteering, societies and academic extracurriculars (Holdsworth 2010). Participant 6 notes that their participation was motivated by 'trying to help other people as opposed to helping myself'. Similarly, participant 16 stated they set up a society as they were 'trying to help students that had difficulties either with their essays or they wanted help with their CVs, cover letters … so we were doing some small gatherings to help them and that was my motivation they were just, I wanted to help'.

We found that both positive and negative course experiences, and broader social problems, provided students with a sense of duty and motivated them to purposefully engage with specific extracurriculars to 'give back' (participant 6, academic activity). Positive experiences primarily related to course and broader university experience, and participants spoke of wanting to give back to their course and institution by sharing their positive experience. Such students mainly engaged in academic extracurriculars such as course representative and ambassador roles, representing student voice within the institution and engaging with prospective students to share their experiences and

promote the university externally. The roles allowed them to give back to the institution by promoting their positive experiences and showing others that the university is 'a good place to come and study' (participant 8, student ambassador). Equally, students described enjoying their course, but felt there were 'things that could be improved' and that through engagement they could 'feedback' (participant 18, course representative) into their courses and help make them better 'for [their] set and also for those that are coming behind [them] as well' (participant 21, ambassador and course representative). Others had less positive course and university experiences but were similarly motivated to engage to 'change and improve things at [their] faculty and at the university' (participant 33, course representative). Actions taken by such students included sharing issues and working with academic staff to address them and improve things for future cohorts:

> 'I wanted to help people... when I applied to university, I didn't really get that much help. I looked around but I got most of my information from asking the students who were there. So, I felt it's best for me to give them information from the horse's mouth to say'. (Participant 13, student ambassador)

Research suggests that pro-social motivation is synergistic with other factors (e.g. intrinsic motivation) in explaining participation in voluntary activities (Grant 2008). We similarly found that other motivations typically accompanied pro-social motivation. Most notably, students noted both extrinsic motivations to develop skills and experiences via volunteering and academic extracurriculars, alongside their prosocial motivation to give back and do good. These were viewed as complementary by students in that they could do good for others and benefit their future. For instance, participant 7 first noted; 'I've always wanted to kind of represent my cohort's voice because I feel like I've got the time to do it, to be able to kind of help other people', before later adding that 'and I thought it would be nice to kind of get something on my CV for it'. Few students expressed a purely pro-social motivation to engage in their extracurriculars, which is consistent with prior work on student volunteering (e.g. Holdsworth 2010) and the motivation-based theory of volunteerism (Penner et al. 2005). These suggest that pro-social motivations are typically accompanied by individualistic motivations for personal development.

3.4 Social motivation

University represents a significant transition within the education system as many students move into new and unfamiliar environments; new courses, friends, cities et cetera. Consistent with the importance of developing relationships for happiness and an enjoyable university experience (Demir 2010), we found making friends and meeting people was an important motivation for students engaging in extracurriculars. As participant 45 notes; 'why I got so involved in extra curriculum is because I had such a problem when I started at the university with like meeting people and talking to people'. Participant 2, an international student, similarly noted that they found it 'hard to find friendships outside of like classes' so extracurriculars provided a way to meet people. This difficulty in meeting people, particularly on their courses had motivated students to engage extensively in extracurriculars, for example, one student set up a new society for their course to encourage their classmates to interact and make friends:

> 'I put it up was because there was no social interaction with your peers whilst you're doing the course. It was very much go to your lectures and then go home. There was never that connection with anyone else so myself and one of my friends said we would like to change this, and we got together with the module leaders and they put us with another group who were thinking the same' (participant 39, class related society)

Social motivation was largely identified as important for participation in sport and societies, likely due to their emphasis on relationship building and socialising through direct participation in the activities of the society/sport. Sport and societies also bring together groups of like-minded students with a similar interest in that sport and society, and thus, provide opportunities for students to meet

people with similar interests. As noted by participant 40; 'part of me joining was I wanted to meet people as well and I like to meet people that like the same kind of things that I liked'.

3.5 Level of study

> 'I suppose it changed at different points in my life. At this point employability is probably my biggest driving factor . . . . to prove you know I can do multiple things at once and I have that experience, but I think when I was younger it was more money and peer pressure [laugh]' (Participant 10).

Motivations for extracurriculars can evolve across the levels of study. In participant 10's case from monetary and social in the early stage of their studies to gaining experience and skills as they approached the job market. We next consider whether the influence of the four motivations varied across levels of study. To do this, we split our data into early (1st and 2nd years) and final year students and compared the prevalence of our motivations in each cohort.[2] This constituted 21 early-year students and 17 final-year students. We found a higher prevalence of gaining general experience and skills (a component of extrinsic motivation) in the final year cohort, with approximately 88% indicating this motivation, compared to approximately 76% for early year students. This is likely due to final year students' closer proximity to the job market and resultant greater need for experience and skills to bolster their employment prospects. The proximity produces a more strategic focus where students search for and engage in extracurriculars with the direct aim of gaining skills and experience to support their future careers. The prevalence in early year students was also high, however, suggesting that gaining experience and skills is an important extracurricular throughout university. However, we found no difference between cohorts regarding acquiring specific experience and skills as a motivation. This suggests that although final year students seem more likely to engage in extracurriculars to acquire skills and experience, they are no more likely to be focused and seeking specific skills (e.g. leadership) or experience (e.g. a marketing position) than early year students.

We found monetary gain (a component of extrinsic motivation) was more prevalent with early year students, with 81% indicating this motivation, compared to 65% of final-year students. We found higher levels of intrinsic motivation amongst the early year students, with 67% indicating this motivation, compared to 53% for final year students. These may reflect changing priorities as students transition through university and move closer to the job market. Finally, we found that prosocial motivation was more prevalent amongst the final year students, with 71% indicating this motivation, compared to 52% for early year students. Given this motivation was most important for academic extracurriculars, this could reflect final year students' longer exposure to the 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of their course and the university experience that seems to underpin the goal to give back and help.

4 Conclusions

We aimed to better understand how, and which, motivations explain student extracurriculars. Our analysis revealed four key motivations. Extrinsic motivation was prominent amongst most participants and for a wide range of extracurriculars – namely, employment, academic, volunteering and societies. Here, the students noted engaging in the pursuit of monetary gain and the acquisition of skills and experience. Most students focused on gaining general employability skills, with a minority identifying specific skills and experience. Intrinsic and social motivations were found to be key for sports and societies, with interest, enjoyment and meeting new people driving student extracurricular engagement. Pro-social motivation was important for student engagement in academic, volunteering and society extracurriculars, reflecting a desire to give back and countering the notion of a solely employability-driven student. The prevalence of different motivations varies between early-year and final-year students, with the monetary gain component of extrinsic motivation and

intrinsic motivation more prevalent for early-year students, and the gaining experience and skills component of extrinsic motivation and pro-social motivation more prevalent for final-year students.

Our paper makes two important contributions to the HE literature. First, we further the motivational perspective on extracurriculars by providing novel insight into the motivations shaping student extracurricular participation in the current heavily marketised and regulated UK HE institutional environment. Scant earlier work (Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott 2010; Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012) offers initial insight on the factors and motivations but prior to the dramatic marketisation and regulatory changes that have altered the institutional environment of UK HE in the last decade. Indeed, the institutional changes are important as we identified a higher prevalence of extrinsic motivation underpinning engagement in a wide range of extracurriculars (namely, employment, academic, volunteering and societies) than earlier work. This is largely consistent with the increasing emphasis on employability within the HE institutional environment. While extrinsic motivations were highly prevalent, however, most students were focused on a 'general skill and experience bump', with few engaging in pursuit of specific skills (e.g. leadership) or experience (e.g. a marketing job). This suggests that while the employability agenda may be shaping student goals, there is only a superficial or undirected buy-in from students (and other stakeholders), without a specific understanding – or ability or willingness to articulate such an understanding – of the specific skills and experience they need to gain from extracurriculars to enhance their employability. In this way, while engagement may be strategic, students are generally not making deliberate choices to engage in a particular extracurricular to gain maximum benefit for a specific skill or to obtain specific experience.

One area where there was evidence for students seeking specific skills from extracurriculars was interpersonal skills. This supports the evidence that (some) students are not acquiring these important skills during their studies (CBI 2017; OFS 2019; Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020) and thus, are seeking alternative development avenues. While interpersonal skills are typically promoted by universities as key skills students acquire through the curriculum, some universities have reduced and limited learning activities such as group and project work in response to student feedback. Such actions may have potentially reduced opportunities for students to develop these skills within the curriculum.

The higher prevalence of extrinsic motivation raises concerns about the employability benefits students may gain from participation and, in turn, the merits of this prevalent motivation and approach. Evidence suggests that extrinsic motivations lead to shallow engagement that may hinder learning and the development of the purported employability benefits (Janke 2020). The insight on extrinsic motivation complements and helps explain evidence of some students not developing employability benefits, and in some cases feeling at a deficit, because of extracurriculars (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021). Giving the growing prevalence of extrinsic motivation we identify, particularly for employment, universities may seek to monitor the extent of student engagement, and where lacking, encourage or provide support that encourages deep(er) and more meaningful engagement. These concerns are lessened for academic, volunteering and society extracurriculars as our evidence suggests that intrinsic, social, and pro-social motivations are also prominent here.

Despite the significant institutional environment shifts towards employability, intrinsic, social, and pro-social motivations were prominent, particularly for sports and societies. The heterogeneity of motivations underpinning extracurricular engagement supports the notion of students having heterogeneous dispositions to employability (Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012). Despite the growing employability focus of UK HE, students still engage for a much broader set of reasons. So, the factors propelling students to engage cannot simply be reduced to employability, and universities and researchers need to consider the broader intrinsic, social, and pro-social reasons that also motivate students in their strategies. If student extracurricular engagement is to be enhanced, our research suggests that the dominant employability debate should be both strengthened and broadened to include the intrinsic, social, and pro-social factors propelling student engagement, particularly in sports and societies. Rather than only pushing employability on students as reasons for their

participation, legitimising and highlighting other motivations, such as intrinsic motivation, as valid and important could also be particularly beneficial for encouraging the skill development sought by employers and universities. As these motivations were particularly pertinent for sports and societies, our research suggests that these activities are likely to be particularly beneficial for skill development (Allen et al. 2013). Our insights contribute by showing how motivations impact student decision-making, by revealing the underlying reasons that propel students to engage in different extracurriculars, and by showing the important boundary condition of the institutional environment that shapes the prevalence and activation of different motivations.

Second, we contribute by revealing the stage of study, which has been overlooked in earlier studies, acts as an important boundary condition. We found important differences between early-year and final-year students in their extracurricular motivations. The experience component of extrinsic motivation and pro-social motivation were more prominent for final-year students. The finding may reflect the closer proximity to the job market and the greater exposure to the positive and negative aspects of their university life, motivating the desire to give back. Whereas the monetary component of extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation were more prominent for early-year students. The finding may reflect the costs of university being greater in the earlier stages – potentially due to relocation costs, adjustment costs, et cetera – and a greater focus on enjoyment at this stage. Our findings extend previous work that has largely focused only on second-year students (Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012) by showing how extracurricular engagement, and the important types of motivation, vary between early- and final-year students. It suggests that the dominant employability focus of the extracurricular debate is likely to be less effective amongst early-year students as they are also prioritising other goals related to money, enjoyment, and interest. As learning and development are cumulative and take place over time (Chapman, Lucena, and Afcha 2018), encouraging greater participation in the early years by better targeting these motivations may enable students to benefit more from extracurriculars. Moreover, while the employability focus better aligns with the goals of final-year students, many are also simultaneously pursuing pro-social goals in response to their university experiences. Our insights show that efforts to support student extracurricular engagement need to differ by study stage.

For universities aiming to support student employability, our work has important implications. First, to support student extracurricular engagement, universities need to attend to the motivations driving students to engage in extracurriculars and seek to match the stimulus of their recruitment efforts to the motivations shaping student behaviour. Predominately, while targeting extrinsic motivations – consistent with the important HE institutional environment shifts towards employability – is likely to be highly effective, such efforts are unlikely to be effective for the intrinsic, social, and prosocial motivations we identified as important for a range of extracurriculars. As such, universities should both strengthen the employability focus and broaden it to highlight the enjoyment, passion, and socialising elements of these extracurriculars and how they can help students fulfil these goals. Universities could organise seminars, advertising campaigns, or structured induction activities, that convey these elements of extracurriculars more clearly to students. Equally, highlighting the diversity of extracurricular options available that likely align to an interest of most students. Alongside a focus on motivation, particularly to encourage non-engaged students to begin participating in extracurriculars, universities should also attend to the important time, location, and money barriers that inhibit engagement through for example, student support programmes and developing more flexible means of participation (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2021). Second, it suggests that rather than a one size fits all approach, universities may need to directly target and support early- and final-year students who are differently motivated to engage in extracurriculars. The employability focus is less attractive to early-year students who display more monetary and intrinsic motivations; highlighting and communicating how extracurriculars can meet these broader goals may support participation. Finally, while extracurricular engagement should provide employability advantages, research also recognises that it can create challenges and competing responsibilities that can have adverse impacts (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Dickinson, Griffiths, and

Bredice 2021). Hence, in seeking to encourage extracurricular participation, universities should also be cognisant of the potential adverse impacts and seek to monitor and mitigate them.

As with all research, ours is not without its limitations. First, we focus on a post-92 institutional context, and thus, more research-active contexts may offer different approaches, backgrounds or incentives that could shape the motivations underlying extracurricular participation. Second, while we focus on the reasons propelling students to engage in extracurriculars, we do not provide insights into the reasons why non-engaged students do not engage, which could differ. Future work to shed insight on non-engaged students would be valuable.

Notes

1. Some criticise this agenda, including employer complied lists (e.g. Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004).
2. 1st and 2nd year students were grouped together due to the low number of first years. We also had 7 postgraduates and 1 who had recently graduated. These were excluded from this analysis.

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