

The Impact of Covid-19 on Education

Perspectives on the
impact of lockdown

August 2021

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Introduction



Looking back on the last year, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed our lives in ways that we could never have imagined. It has exposed weaknesses in the current education system, highlighting our broken assessment system, the exacerbation of the digital divide, and an increasingly unsustainable and unsuitable workload placed on our teachers.

Yet, we have also seen an incredible resilience, and an opportunity to create and innovate in new ways. We witnessed the cancellation of exams, increased home-working, our schools and teachers working through new digital mediums of teaching and learning, and the world continues to transform in a way that we may never have predicted before.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to rebuild our economy and society for the better. Rather than reinforcing the negative narrative of our young people as having “lost learning”, we can support them to become the “bounceback generation” instead, poised at the forefront of exciting and perhaps unpredictable change. We must also wrap our arms around our teaching workforce, so that they continue to feel supported and valued.

In this report, we build on our original publication on [“The impact of Covid-19 on education”](#) produced in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, and gather together a number of different perspectives and research findings on the impact of Covid-19. Firstly we focus on the impact that the pandemic has had on education, and then turn our attention towards recovery to explore the opportunities that we have to rebuild a better, post-Covid world.

The arguments for a return to the old ways are weakening. We will continue to build on these reflections to understand the changes needed in our system as we seek to build a better future and make education truly relevant.

Alice Barnard

Chief Executive, Edge Foundation

A: The Impact

The Impact of Covid on Education – one year on...

Dr Angela Donkin, Chief Social Scientist, NFER

NFER has been documenting the impact of Covid on the education system since the first period of partial school closures in 2020. Our [surveys](#), carried out using our Teacher Voice [Omnibus](#), explored two key issues: how remote learning was being delivered by teachers; and pupils' engagement with it.

NFER has been documenting the impact of Covid on the education system since the first period of partial school closures in 2020. Our surveys, carried out using our Teacher Voice Omnibus, explored two key issues: how remote learning was being delivered by teachers; and pupils' engagement with it.

Comparing responses in May 2020 and March 2021, when most pupils were **learning remotely**, there was a noticeable increase in pre-recorded and live teaching ('active teaching'). Nonetheless, while during the first lockdown teachers felt they had covered just 66% of the usual curriculum, by 2021, despite the change to providing more active teaching, this had still **only risen to 70% coverage**.

Another aspect influencing the impact of the pandemic on education is the engagement of pupils with that provision. During the first lockdown, senior leaders stated that 71% of primary, and 63% of secondary pupils were engaged in learning activities. By 2021, the average figure for engagement with live lessons across all schools was at 75%. Although these were slightly different questions and so not directly comparable, they do provide a picture that illustrates **a third to a quarter of children not engaging**. In May 2020, the percentage of pupils returning their last piece of set work to their teacher was 42%, but in the most recent period, this figure had risen to 55%. The depth of engagement with school work has therefore improved, but is still a cause for concern.

So what impact did this have on educational attainment? Estimating the impact of the pandemic on education has not been possible with statutory tests, because they have largely been cancelled. However,

NFER has a range of standardised tests, closely related to the National Curriculum, to help primary schools monitor the performance of their pupils. Utilising these, we found that **by November 2021 year 2 children were on average two months behind in [English and Maths](#)**. Other research monitoring different age groups has found similar results. Throughout this academic year, we are continuing to track pupils' progress using these tests.



There is a huge amount of detail in our tests which enables us to identify particular areas in which children are behind. For example, year 2 pupils were better at addition and subtraction than the pre-Covid sample, potentially because remote learning in the first lockdown had focused on consolidating what they knew. However they had **fallen behind on multiplication and division, and reading the time** – key elements of the year 2 curriculum. For reading, the two-month gap was driven by children at the lower end of the ability spectrum, who had fallen further behind, whereas in maths, the gap was driven by children at the higher end of the ability spectrum falling behind. This is illustrated in the graphs below.

While we might hope that the partial school closures at the beginning of 2021 have not added as much as another two months of lost learning, the figures on curriculum coverage and engagement suggest that some pupils will have fallen further behind.

One size won't fit all.

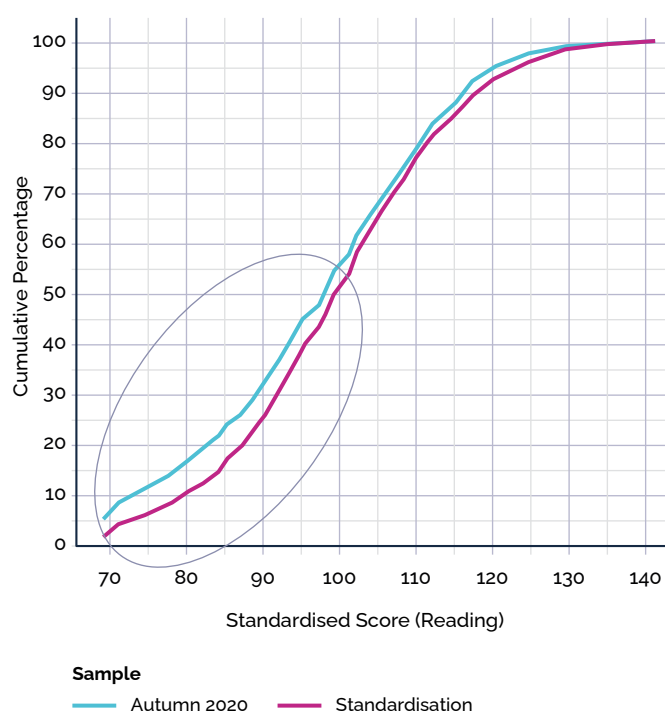
For those now thinking about policies and programmes to help rectify this situation, there is another important element to consider – the average figures mask

high levels of variation between children. In particular, the gap between the attainment of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who are more advantaged, had widened by November in both maths and reading. In the most recent period of partial school closures, just 59% of children in schools with the highest proportions of FSM children engaged with remote learning, compared to 78% of pupils in schools with the lowest proportions. We might therefore expect a further widening of this gap.

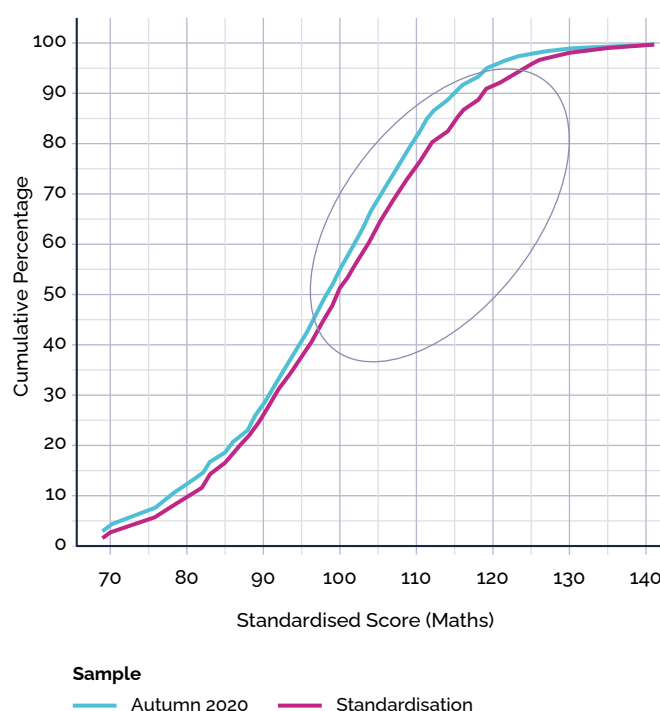
For some schools, particularly in areas with high levels of disadvantage, there is likely to be more work required and more help needed. These schools are less likely to be able to meet the [additional costs of dealing with the pandemic](#), and further, there has been substantial regional variation in the take-up of the National Tutoring Program (NTP) which may be driven by **differences in geographical access to high-quality in-person tuition.**

So what next? Given the variability in experience, **the use of diagnostic assessment for children is an essential tool** that teachers already have in their armoury. This can be used by teachers to identify where whole-class teaching needs to be adapted (when many children have fallen behind) and to inform what

Distribution of Reading Standardised Scores



Distribution of Maths Standardised Scores





to cover in small group or one-to-one tuition (where fewer children have fallen behind in specific areas). Approaches by subject may need to vary, given that we have found differences in the reasons for the gap in reading and maths for pupils of different abilities. Given the variability between schools, a nuanced approach should be considered there too. **Let's not forget the**

importance of well-being. Children need to play and see their friends so scheduling learning at the expense of social interaction would be detrimental to mental health. It's important that policymakers engage with headteachers to see what they need and not presume that a one size fits all approach will suffice.



Angela Donkin
Chief Social Scientist, NFER

The impact of Covid on education has been substantial, but there is a high level of variability in the effect on children's attainment. Some schools have taught more of the curriculum than others. Some children have engaged and some have not, and the impact on attainment has been different according to the subject in question. Diagnostic testing of pupils, together with tailored support to address their gaps is needed. Blanket measures which are not grounded in needs assessment and consultation with schools will threaten recovery because one size will not fit all.

Personal Stories of Learning Loss

Paul E. Newton, Research Chair, Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

Since autumn 2020, a research team at Ofqual has monitored the growing body of research into learning during the pandemic. We have now drawn this work together as a series of [five reports](#), which were published in July 2021.

Our overarching objective (in drawing this work together) was to **understand the impact of the pandemic on students** – primarily from years 11 to 13 – whose learning was to be certificated in summer 2021. So, we subdivided the past two academic years **into five distinct phases**:

- Phase 0 – September 2019 to late March 2020 (pre-pandemic)
- Phase 1 – late March 2020 to end summer term 2020 (mainly remote learning)
- Phase 2 – autumn term 2020 (mainly 'new normal' learning)
- Phase 3 – January 2021 to early March 2021 (mainly remote learning)
- Phase 4 – early March 2021 to mid-May 2021 (mainly 'new normal' learning)

The best way to illustrate our collective findings is by creating a number of hypothetical scenarios, like those in the 'lost time' analysis presented in Table 1. This narrates **5 stories of learning during the pandemic for 5 hypothetical students**. All 5 of these students live in the same street in the same town, and 3 of them are from the same class at the same school. Student 4 attends a school nearby, while student 5 is home-educated.

Over the past year or so, we have become accustomed to headlines such as: 'students have lost more than half of their teaching time.' Yet, **this idea of 'lost time' is not at all straightforward**. For instance, as a vulnerable child, student 2 attended school every day of every week, throughout the pandemic. So, in a sense, he lost no in-school teaching time at all. Whereas, student 3, like most of her classmates, lost one-third of her in-school teaching time. However, this does not necessarily mean that she lost more learning.



The idea of lost time is not exactly a red herring as far as learning loss is concerned, but there is no direct translation from time into loss. We actually concluded that **most students will have been studying for much of the time that was available to them** in the run up to summer 2021 – albeit generally under abnormal circumstances, typically under less than ideal circumstances, and sometimes under extremely unfavourable ones. These **different circumstances will have been critical** in determining how much learning each individual student will have lost, or perhaps even gained.

We do know that **students with poorer home learning circumstances have found it harder to learn** – with limited access to technology, limited space to study, and so on. Both student 1 and student 2 had poor home learning circumstances, even though student 1 came from a medium income family. Student 1, who had to shield on the advice of a clinician, was forced to study

at home throughout. Indeed, for much of that time, she also had to care for her younger brother. Ultimately, she was very seriously affected by learning loss.

Student 2 – a vulnerable child – never actually had to study remotely and was therefore insulated from the worst of consequences. However, his school failed to respond well to the pandemic. He spent much of both remote-learning phases being supervised, rather than being taught, and he struggled with this. His learning, too, was seriously affected by the pandemic.

Student 3 – also from the same class – ostensibly lost more in-school teaching time than student 2. Yet, she was a high-achieving student from a high-income family. She made the most of the limited support, guidance and teaching that she received from her school. Optimally resourced while working at home, she made the best of a bad situation. She still ended up with significant learning loss, but far less than her disadvantaged classmates.

Student 4 was very similar to student 3, in terms of prior achievement and family background. Yet, his school responded extremely well to the pandemic. It switched to live, online lessons almost immediately following the March 2020 lockdown, managing to deliver almost all lessons in this fashion until the end of the summer.

Ultimately, student 4 escaped with only minimal learning loss. He learned nearly as much, by summer 2021, as if the pandemic had never struck.

Yet, it was student 5 who lost the least learning, relatively speaking. Her home-learning circumstances remained essentially unchanged throughout the pandemic, reflecting her home-educated status. Of course, the spectre of COVID-19 made it hard to concentrate sometimes. Yet, with day to day support and encouragement from her newly furloughed father, she was able to overcome this obstacle, and to avoid any learning losses at all.

Research published since March 2020 indicates very clearly that **students from certain backgrounds – particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged ones – have been especially badly affected**. Yet, we must not lose sight of the fact that, while this is true on average, there will also have been very many exceptions. Closer analysis reveals that stories of learning during the pandemic are far too complex and nuanced to be told simply (or even primarily) in terms of group effects. Learning loss, and therefore **learning catch-up, is a phenomenon that needs to be understood from the perspective of each and every student, individually**.



Table 1. Teaching weeks spent in different circumstances from early September 2019 to mid-May 2021 (hypothetical scenarios)

	Place of study	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Provider		School A	School A	School A	School B	Home-educated
Family income		Medium	Low	High	High	Medium
COVID status		Shielding	Vulnerable	n/a	n/a	Parent on Furlough
Phase 0 (pre-pandemic)	At home					25
	At school	25	25	25	25	
Phase 1 (mainly remote learning)	At home	14		14	14	14
	At school		14			
Phase 2 (mainly 'new normal' learning)	At home	14				14
	At school		14	14	14	
Phase 3 (mainly remote learning)	At home	8		8	8	8
	At school		8			
Phase 4 (mainly 'new normal' learning)	At home	8				8
	At school		8	8	8	
September 2019 to mid-May 2021	At home	44 (64%)		22 (32%)	22 (32%)	69 (100%)
	At school	25 (36%)	69 (100%)	47 (68%)	47 (68%)	
Learning Loss		VERY HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW	NONE



Paul Newton
Research Chair, Ofqual

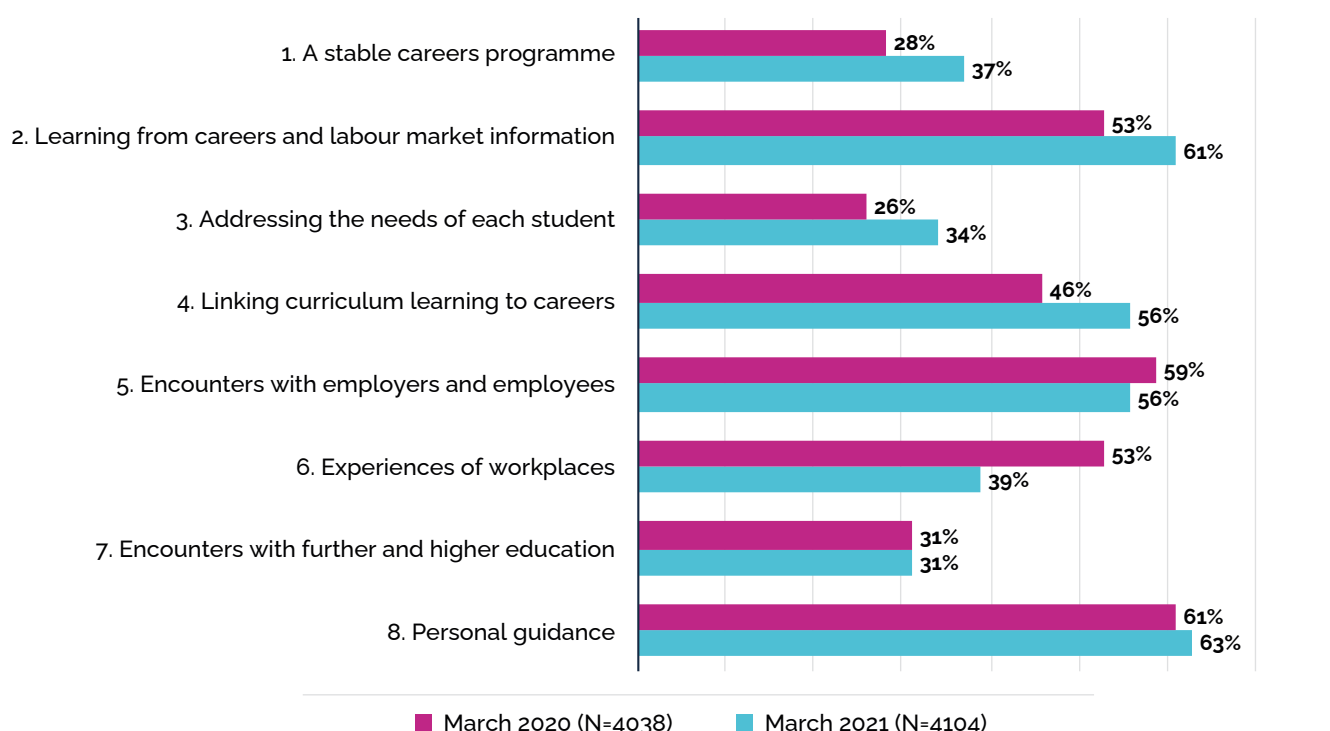
By summer 2021, most students are likely to have experienced a net learning loss as a result of the pandemic – that is, they will have learnt less by summer 2021 than if the pandemic had never struck. Even students from very similar backgrounds, registered in the same class at the same school, might end up having experienced quite different levels of learning loss, depending on the particular circumstances of their learning during the pandemic.

Careers Education and the Impact of Covid

Emily Tanner, Head of Research, The Careers & Enterprise Company

Given the experiential and tailored nature of careers education for 11-18s, it is no surprise that social distancing, school and college closures, and lockdown have **impacted on opportunities for young people**.

Chart: Percentage of schools and colleges fully achieving each Gatsby Benchmark in March 2020 and 2021



National Compass data, based on school and college self-assessments of provision against the eight [Gatsby Benchmarks](#), show **a decline over the past year in employer engagement activities** – in particular, experiences of the workplace have been severely affected by the widespread disruption to businesses. However, other areas remain strong – for example, providing students in schools with information about the full range of post-16 options, including apprenticeships.

In response to the challenges, Careers Leaders, employers and careers activity providers **have worked together to create new approaches to careers activities**, encompassing personal guidance, employer engagement, careers learning within the curriculum, and college and university 'visits'.

Following The Careers & Enterprise Company's '[My Week of Work](#)' programme of virtual work experience in partnership with Oak National Academy and Learn Live in June 2020, there have been many other **examples of virtual and blended activities**. For example businesses across Suffolk, from engineering firms to football clubs to banks, created digital platforms and showcased multiple workplaces and jobs across the community for young people. We published the [Careers in Context guides](#) last autumn in 2020 to stimulate ideas for meaningful engagement, with two-way interaction and opportunities for learning.

There is a general consensus that **virtual careers activities cannot fully replace in-person experience, especially in light of inequalities in digital access, but**

there have also been some positive experiences that careers professionals, young people and volunteers are keen to retain. For example, the [independent evaluation](#) of the Careers & Enterprise Company's Personal Guidance Fund by the University of Derby found that on the whole students were positive about meeting careers advisers online and in some cases, felt more at ease. There have also been **positives to online employer engagement, such as removing geographical barriers and widening opportunities.**

As schools and colleges grapple with Covid recovery, we have seen a commitment amongst the majority of education leaders to careers learning. Even though Careers Leaders typically have other roles alongside their careers work, most senior leaders reported that Careers Leaders' time had increased (46%) or stayed the same (42%). The prioritisation of careers work over the past three years since the Careers Strategy, noted in our [2019 research](#), appears to hold. 72% of school senior leaders in last summer's Pye Tait research expected careers to remain a high priority, and in spring 2021, 80% of the college strategic Careers Leaders reported careers provision to be a higher priority than three years previously.

Despite the challenges, there is also a high level of commitment from employers. In a [poll of 250 business leaders last summer](#), 76% said there is an

increased need for employers to support young people into the world of work, and 82% believe engagement with students in school and college is important. Commitment on its own does not of course remove the barriers, **and the role of Careers Hubs and the Enterprise Adviser Network continues to be essential in building strong partnerships** and transforming good intentions into action. In spring 2021, despite the pressures on individuals and businesses, 84% of Enterprise Advisers (volunteers from business) intended to continue in their role and only 3% had decided to discontinue.



High quality careers education is vital at the best of times, but in the context of the pandemic its role couldn't be more important. I've seen up-close, first as a headteacher, and now working with schools and colleges across the country, the incredible innovation taking place to support young people during this time. From virtual work experience to the commitment of businesses still supporting and beaming into schools, to teachers linking the national curriculum to the world of work, so much is taking place to support students to take their best next steps. While the pandemic has made it harder to deliver careers education, it's reaffirmed our belief in the transformative power it can have on a young person's life.

Oli de Botton

Chief Executive, The Careers & Enterprise Company

B: The Recovery

Why parents must be an integral part of education recovery – and how to make it a reality

Kerry-Jane Packman, Executive Director of Programmes, Membership and Charitable Services, Parentkind

Partial school closures threw family life into disarray and raised many concerns about the potential long-term impact on young people's academic attainment and life outcomes.

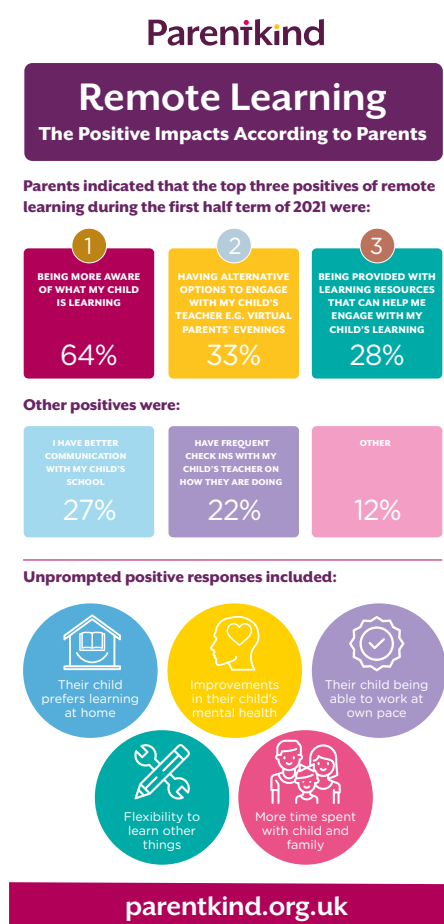
Parents adapted to a 'new normal', even though many struggled to manage the competing demands of jobs and caring commitments, with overseeing their children's remote learning. As a nation, we embarked on the **biggest experiment in parental engagement in education** that had ever been tried. We understand the journey families have been on because Parentkind set out to capture and track parental opinion as soon as most pupils switched to remote learning. From March 2020 onwards, we ran polls which built up a picture of parent voice, revealing trends and measuring if parents' perceptions changed over time.

Early polls understandably **highlighted major concerns, which were more acute among parents of children at a critical educational stage**, such as those in exam cohorts. We found high levels of worry overall, not merely for academic outcomes, but also for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Our second survey, which closed in May 2020, was shared by the Department for Education and other major stakeholders. This helped us to spread the word, and we ultimately received an unprecedented sample of over a quarter of a million responses. By then, almost **a third of parents said they felt more confident in supporting their child's learning** than at the start of lockdown. However, more than a **quarter of parents reported being more worried about the impact on their child's education**, perhaps because of the uncertainty around how long the disruption would continue. **The top concern, nominated by almost half of parents, was their child not seeing their friends and socialising**, placed even above their child missing out on learning from teachers.

As polling continued, reasons to be cautiously optimistic emerged. Our February 2021 poll found that the percentage of parents worrying about the impact of the pandemic on their child's education has significantly reduced, even compared to January 2021 data.

Figure 1: February 2021 polling found cautious reasons to be optimistic



Almost half of respondents say they are less worried now about the impact of the pandemic on their child's learning than they were when schools first closed to most pupils. Increased satisfaction in remote learning provision offered by schools may be one reason for this uptick in positivity, but the evidence also points to **parents growing in confidence** in playing their part supporting learning at home (almost four out of five parents report that they are confident, compared to only two thirds back in May 2020). Parents have simply become **more ingrained in their child's education**. Our research found almost two thirds of parents say they are now more aware of what their child is learning. One in three parents also tell us they **appreciate having alternative options to engage with their child's teacher** such as virtual parents' evenings. This is a great time-saver for working parents, and removes the barrier of having to enter the school building for those parents who did not have a good experience of school.

Policymakers **must now look for solutions to capitalise on the increased parental investment and confidence in supporting children's learning**. Parentkind's 'Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools' is a framework for every school that can be easily mapped onto existing parental engagement strategies. The [IPPR think tank's 'The 'new normal': The future of education after Covid-19' report](#) is a call to not simply recover the education system of pre-pandemic times, but to grasp the opportunity to 'build back better'. They call on government to work

with schools and parents, drawing on our Blueprint to establish and embed an ambitious **new parental engagement strategy at the heart of our education system, to be implemented by teachers** who have benefited from effective parental engagement training.



It's clear from what parents have told us throughout the Covid crisis that many more have now discovered the enormous positive impact they have on their child's learning. Not only that, but most simply don't want to lose their increased involvement once all of the restrictions are lifted.

This is an exciting juncture for education: the potential benefits of parental engagement on outcomes for children are enormous, and behaviour and attendance improve too. But policymakers have to grasp the potential of invested parents. It's crucial that parents are not the neglected education stakeholder they too often have been. They must be an integral and valued part of the urgent national conversation about the future of education in this country.

John Jolly
CEO, Parentkind

Avoiding a Pandemic Generation: improving employment for young people

Naomi Clayton, Deputy Director for Research and Development,
Learning and Work Institute

Vacancies have returned to their 2019 levels and the Bank of England now thinks unemployment will peak at 5.5% rather than its previous estimate of 7.75%. But long term **unemployment is rising and some groups have been hit harder than others** – particularly young people.

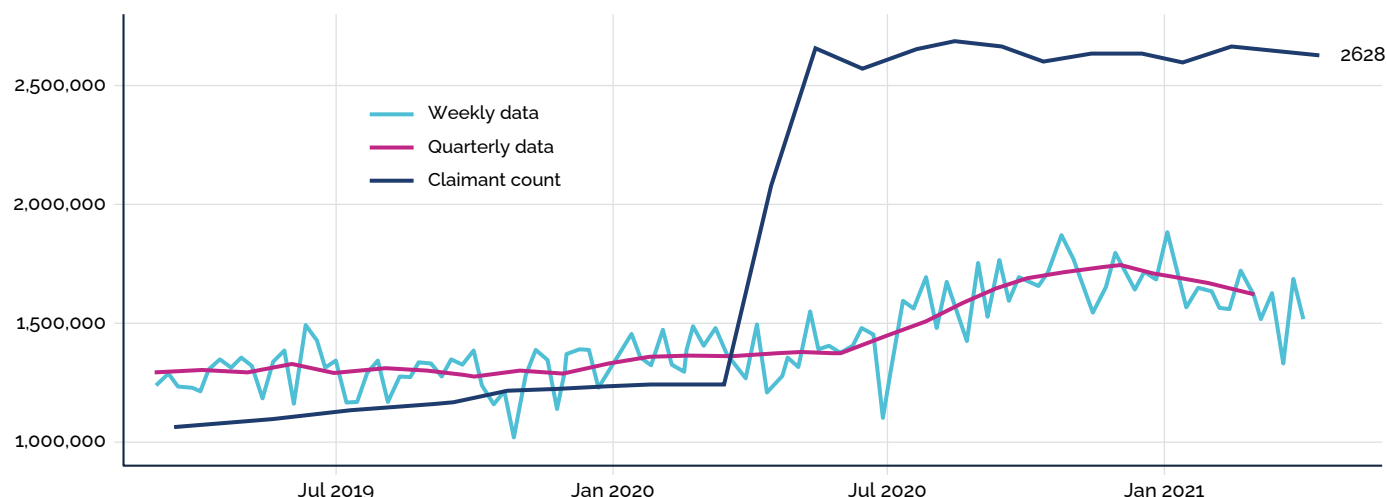
Young people (16-24 year olds) account for nearly three quarters (73%) of the fall in employment, despite accounting for just 12% of total employment. As a result, over half a million 18-24-year-olds are claiming unemployment-related benefits, double pre-crisis levels, and **youth unemployment is almost four times higher than the rest of working age population**. Youth long-term unemployment (more than six months) is 40% higher than last year.

Young people have been disproportionately affected in part because they are **over-represented in 'shutdown' sectors** – the sectors most affected by the crisis, such as retail and hospitality. Retail and hospitality have seen the largest drop in working hours of any sectors (29%); and young people in hospitality saw the biggest drop (41%).

Young people entering the labour market will have **also been affected by the sharp fall in vacancies**. Vacancies dropped by 72% in retail and 80% in hospitality (compared to 40% overall). Scaling back recruitment was the most cited reason (53%) for lower recruitment of young people in our survey of employers. Other reasons include the need for more experienced candidates (28%) and lack of funds for recruitment or training (27%).

Our estimates show that the economic costs of youth unemployment will total nearly £7 billion at the peak in 2022 and total of £21.6 billion over five years. The cost to the exchequer – in lower tax revenues – is forecast to peak at £2.9 billion in 2022 and total of £9.3 billion over five years.

Graph: Claimant and ILO Unemployment (levels)





Rises in youth unemployment are particularly concerning because of the scarring effects a period out of employment can have on their pay and job prospects. **We estimate the long-run scarring costs for young people entering the labour market in 2021 to be more than £14 billion over the next 7 years.**

And **some groups of young people have been impacted harder than others, widening existing inequalities.** For example, the drop in working hours of young people with no qualifications was five times (34%) larger than those with degrees (7%), and the drop in working hours of young black people (49%) was three times larger than for young white people (16%).

Will young people's employment prospects improve as the economy opens up? Previous experience tells us it takes up to seven years for the labour market to recover from a recession. Young people also tend to be overrepresented in sectors that are likely to see slower recovery and lower employment over the longer term (retail, arts and entertainment). The **fall in demand for jobs requiring low or no qualifications also raises concerns about the employment prospects of young people with lower-level qualifications** who have already been hit hard in the downturn.

The government has already introduced a number of measures to support young people into employment.

This includes Kickstart, which creates temporary, subsidised job opportunities for young people on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment, **extra traineeships and additional incentives for employers** who take on young apprentices. Youth Hubs have also been set up to provide local and targeted employment support for young people. These are welcome interventions, but they are disjointed and too many young people will miss out on this support.

Our solution is a Youth Guarantee to ensure all young people who are unemployed and not in education are able to access a job, apprenticeship, or an education or training place. This means doing more to encourage employers to take on young people, introducing a £3,000 hiring subsidy for employers who take on a long-term unemployed young person, and extending and increasing incentives for apprenticeships. **Kickstart should also be extended and eligibility expanded** so that support is available beyond its planned end in December 2021 and young people not on Universal Credit can access opportunities. Achieving this requires sustained partnership working between national and local government, with employers, trade unions and civic society.

If we are to avoid a 'pandemic generation' and limit the scarring effects of the crisis, then we need a more comprehensive approach.

Turning the tide – supporting our young people to bounce back and thrive

James Turner, Chief Executive, Sutton Trust

Whilst almost no area of daily life has been left untouched by the pandemic, the last 18 months have been especially difficult for children and young people – and the consequences will be felt for years to come.

The very youngest children have lived most of their lives under the pandemic, and nursery-aged children have missed out on crucial opportunities for development. Our recent polling found that over half of parents of pre-school children are [worried about the impact of the pandemic](#) on their child's overall development and wellbeing. **Covid has also laid bare the fragility of the early years sector**, with settings in the poorest neighbourhoods being hit the hardest: our research showed that a third of early years' providers in deprived areas [reported that they may have to close](#) within a year.

While all school-aged children have faced serious disruption, **the impact of lost learning has not been felt equally**. At the beginning of 2021, we found that [40% of children in middle class homes](#) were undertaking over 5 hours of school work a day, compared to 26% of those in working class households. Similarly, 35% of households with the lowest incomes reported that their children did not have access to sufficient devices for online learning, compared to 11% in wealthier homes. As a consequence, 84% of teachers said they thought the attainment gap between poor pupils and their peers would increase as a result of the pandemic – backing up research from our sister charity, the EEF, which [forecast a reversing of the progress made to narrow gaps over the last ten years](#).

We also saw **complex challenges across the apprenticeship landscape**. The unique position of apprenticeships – combining education, training and employment – made the sector particularly vulnerable to lockdown. When polled in late 2020, we found that [almost half of apprentices had been furloughed](#), with just 31% of apprenticeships continuing without disruption since the beginning of the pandemic. And this was on top of year-on-year falls in the number of apprentices being taken on, even before Covid struck.

The ongoing **uncertainty around grading and exams means that progression into education or work remains a serious concern for young people** – prior to the chaos of last summer's A level results days, our research found that almost half of university applicants felt the pandemic [would have a negative impact](#) on their chances of getting into their first-choice university. Current undergraduate students are facing an uncertain future too – almost half of students said they're [less likely to find a graduate job because of COVID-19](#), and 61% of employers we surveyed last summer had **cancelled work experience placements** which are vital stepping stones on the road to a career.

So what can we do to support young people through this difficult period and beyond? To start with, **the education sector needs funding on a scale and with the longevity to match the unprecedented nature of the challenge**. Crucially, these resources need to be [focussed on the poorest groups](#).

Given the vital importance of the early years for life chances, the Trust is calling for pre-school children to be put at the heart of education recovery, with an extension of free childcare for the poorest families and more funding to underpin higher quality provision.

For schools, **teaching is without doubt the most important factor in improving the outcomes of all pupils**, and particularly the most disadvantaged. Teachers should be incentivised to work at, and be retained by, schools serving deprived areas. The introduction of targeted support for disadvantaged young people in post-16 education is also vital. Currently, both the pupil premium and the National Tutoring Programme end at age 16. These **policies must be extended to provide support for students in further education who have the least time for recovery** and are at a vital crossroads in their lives.



As we emerge from the pandemic, there should also be a **targeting of apprenticeship opportunities towards disadvantaged young people**, so that they act as a real vehicle for social mobility. The spending of levy money on access activities should be encouraged, and other measures such as a maximum salary ceiling for levy-funded apprentices should be considered. Improving information, advice and guidance on apprenticeships is also key, so that young people are aware of the options available to them.

For many young people, the most important thing now is whether they are able to take their next steps into further study and careers. There must be sufficient opportunities - including university and college places, high quality apprenticeship starts, paid internships, and jobs - for

young people. These **places must be fairly allocated, with employers and education providers taking into account the scale of adversity faced by disadvantaged young people**. Universities in particular should be making greater and more ambitious use of contextual offers.

While Covid has laid bare the inequalities in our education system, we now have a real opportunity to turn the tide. Given how acutely the impacts of the pandemic have been felt by the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, it is vital that we see a laser-like focus on supporting those who need it most. Support not only to recover from the last 15 tumultuous months, but to thrive in education and work in the future.



James Turner
Chief Executive, Sutton Trust

The pandemic has laid bare the inequalities in our education system, with children and young people facing extraordinary challenges over the past year and a half. We have seen serious impacts at every stage from the early years through to higher education and beyond. Our research has highlighted how the impacts of Covid have been felt unequally, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds hit the hardest. Our collective priority must be to do everything we can to help young people bounce back and go on to thrive in education, in work and in their wider lives.

Using the Power of Technology

Louise Rowland, Chief Executive, Ufi VocTech Trust

At Ufi VocTech Trust we champion the power of digital technology to improve skills for work and deliver better outcomes for all. Back in November 2020 the trend we saw emerging was that the communities who are not traditionally well served by mainstream vocational skills and training provision were more likely at greater risk than ever from being remote from training and being able to access employment. These are the learners at the heart of our strategy, so in response we kicked off the 2021 VocTech Challenge to see how we could create a step change in their opportunities.

Our VocTech Challenge [Green Paper](#), published in March 2021, found that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault-lines of inequality. Right across the OECD countries, young people have been hit particularly hard by the disruption to the jobs market.

Figures from the [Department for Education](#) show that **apprenticeships have been severely disrupted**, and in

their report, [Uneven Steps](#), The Resolution Foundation found that in many cases, conditions have deteriorated most among those young people whose pre-pandemic employment position had already been weakest (see figure 1). The **rise in youth unemployment has also been heavily skewed towards those from Black and Asian backgrounds**.

Figure 1: Unemployment rate as % of labour workforce, [OECD](#)

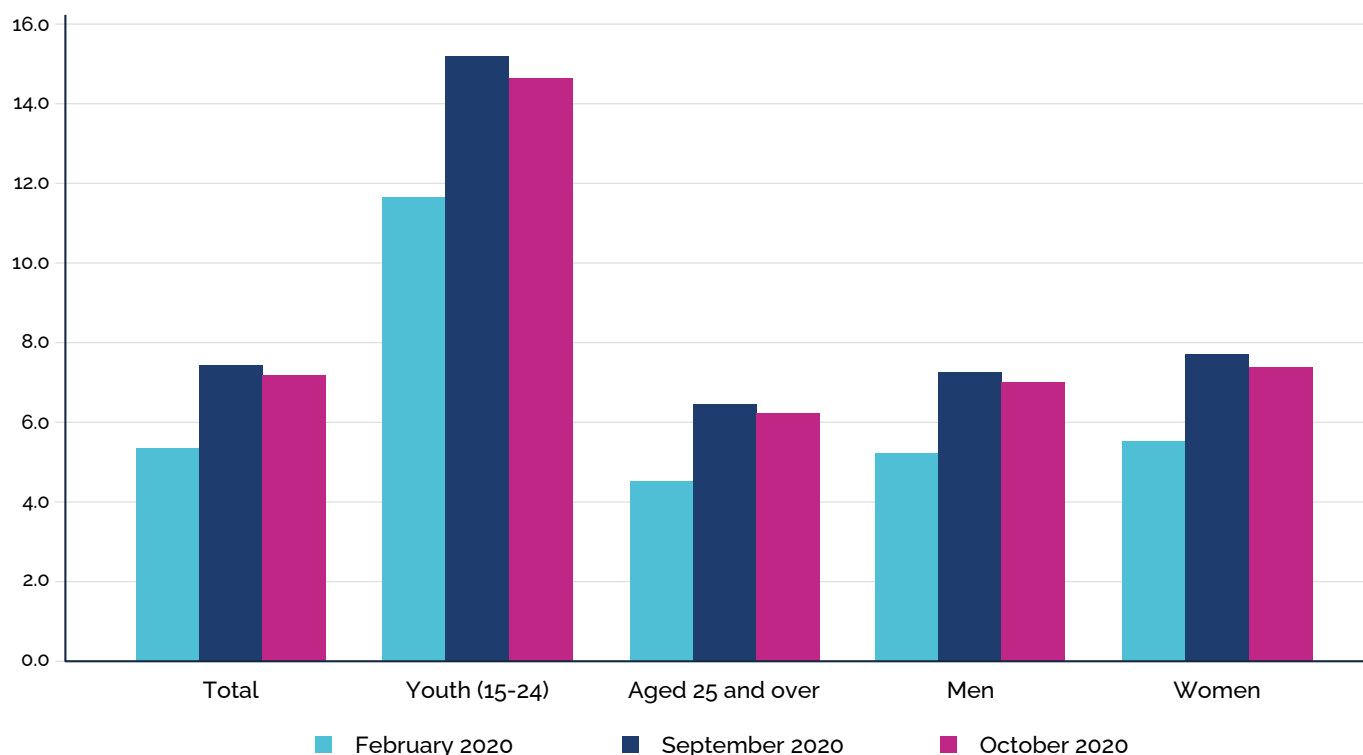
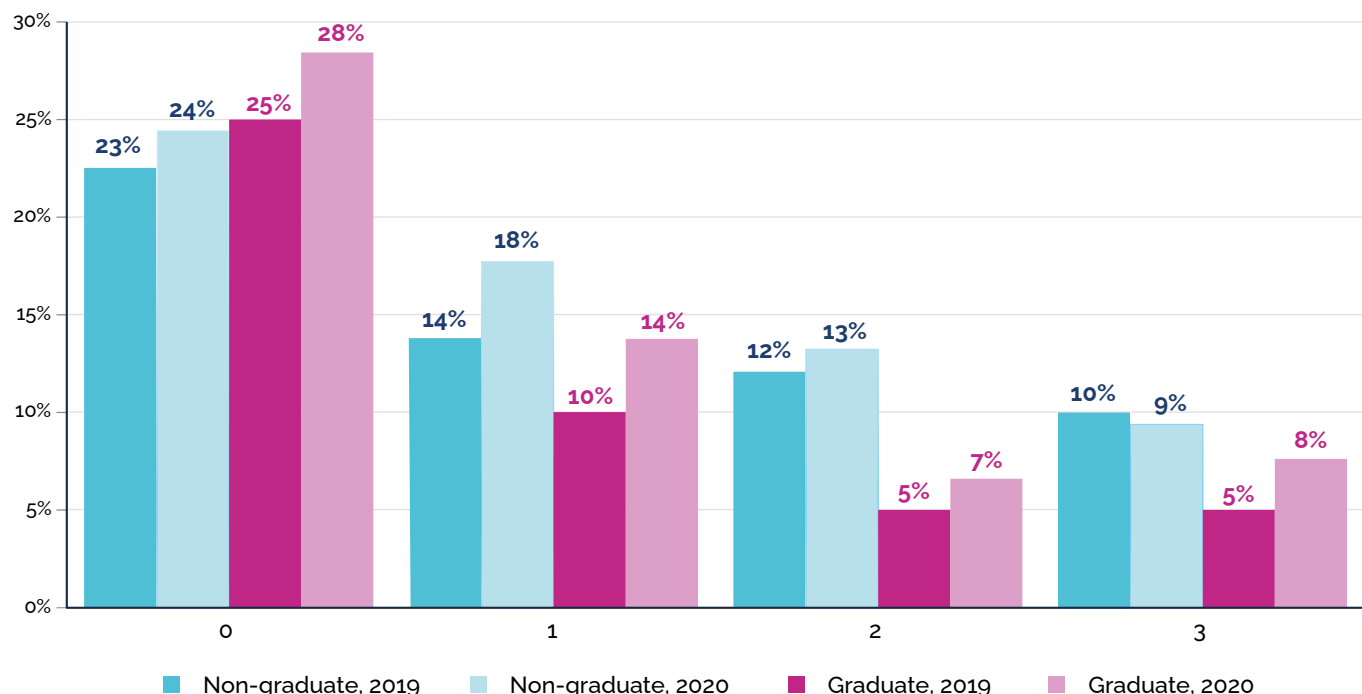


Figure 1: Unemployment rate of 16-24 year olds according to the number of years since having left full-time education: UK (p.14)



NOTES: Young people who are unemployed but who also report being in full-time education are excluded. Those on part-time courses are not excluded. Years since leaving education is calculated by subtracting a respondent's current age from the age they reported they were upon leaving full-time education.
SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey

But there are reasons for hope. **Digital tools offer the potential to help overcome these divisions and level up vocational learning by opening up access** to learning and providing more customised support for those most lacking in confidence - a big issue for many young learners.

The [Ufi VocTech Directory](#) now includes projects and investments **developing AI that can help to personalise learning for young people** doing Maths and English GCSE re-sits ([Century Tech](#)), chatbots that ensure students always have access to the information they need ([Ada](#)), and machine learning to reduce apprenticeship dropout rates by better matched apprentices with employers ([Multiverse](#)).

VR and AR are being deployed to simulate real work environments and reduce the time needed to reach competence in vocational skills. Our projects are doing this in maritime training ([Tripping the Thames](#)), emergency services training ([COPS](#)) and the textiles industry ([Tech For Textiles](#)) to great effect.

But it isn't just the emerging tech that is important. The explosive growth of mobile devices, as well as a significant shift in learning behaviours, triggered by the world of apps and social media has made a 'mobile first' mentality essential for developers – particularly to reach those who have no access to a computer or tablet. We discovered that **mobile devices offer the lowest barrier to access overall, and are critical in engaging young people** in particular. So, our challenge is to explore how we design engaging content that doesn't use too much data and can run on older tech.





Tapping into **user motivation is also integral to learner outcomes**. A personalised experience must take into account the whole person and be flexible around their needs. Content that is engaging, non-linear and makes the best use of gamification elements can go a long way to encourage reluctant learners to give it a go, like dental nurse training app [CHOMP](#). **Collaborative platforms that help learners to become part of a community** can help them to stay with it till the end.

Projects like Skills for Logistics FLOW – creating learning tools for the logistics sector, Bodyswaps and Contented Brothers (both virtual reality learning platforms) – look at the increasingly important world of soft skills training.

We are always looking to support, invest in and partner with organisations whose missions are aligned with ours – to make **big changes in vocational learning using the power of digital**.



The [VocTech Challenge White Paper](#) sets out our commitment to unlock the potential of digital technology to improve opportunities for those most impacted by the digital divide to get the skills they need for work. At Ufi we have a passion for advocating for the potential of digital solutions to form part of good learning design that meets the user where they really are. The very best of digital vocational learning can transform how training happens in real life. When technology is not seen as a replacement for the human, but rather an enhancement, it can support better delivery, improved learner outcomes, and greater access and opportunity. We have funded over 200 projects now that test out these ideas across a range of technologies and sectors. They demonstrate many different approaches, all using user-centred design to make sure they are really relevant to the groups of learners they serve.

Louise Rowland
Deputy CEO, Ufi

C: Case Studies and Commentary

Learning from Lockdown and the Bounce Back Generation

Peter Hyman, Co-Director of Big Education and Co-Founder of School 21

For all the challenges, the hardships, the loss, the anxiety of the last 15 months, we can be confident that this is not the 'lost generation' of pupils. Far from it. Through the extraordinary dedication and skilled guidance of teachers and support staff, this can be the bounce back generation of young people who use the resilience they have shown through this period to become stronger.

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Schools have had to show even greater agility than usual, pivoting between three phases - to **respond, recover and rethink**.

After the initial response, followed by the immediate need to recover and return from lockdown, we have now entered an important new phase. The phase where we crystallise the learning from this period and rethink.

The insights have been coming in fast and on many fronts. We have captured some of them at [Learning from Lockdown](#) where schools leaders, teachers, educationalists, parents, students, academics have tried to make sense of this period and offered ideas for how we can change the education system for the better.

There are some stand out areas, ripe for change, for the new school year. A **renewed desire among many to broaden the curriculum, to balance knowledge, skills and dispositions**; branching out from the 'exam factory' mentality.

Closely linked to this is the focus on **staff and student wellbeing**. This is now front and centre of what matters, and what needs to matter. The sophisticated ways





in which schools such as Surrey Square Primary and School 21 have listened and responded to the needs of staff and students points to a new way forward as schools develop the foundations of healthier and happier communities.

Digital know-how has accelerated - some talk of 20 years of change being shoe-horned into a year - and there is now a body of practice that will give schools and learners the chance to work in interesting new ways. Parents' evenings on zoom for those who are unable to attend. Digital portfolios to capture the full range of student work and thinking. Teacher professional development augmented with access to webinars across the globe. Deeper partnerships with parents and employers, now able to zoom into the classroom and see what's going on, or act as expert collaborators.

There is one change that would unlock so much else - the **rethinking of our assessment system**. After two years of exams being suspended, there is a real opportunity to do something different going

forward. Something less high stakes, more meaningful for students and better for the next stage of a young person's life. A group of us, from [Rethinking Assessment](#) with big support from the Edge Foundation, and a range of independent and state schools, academics and businesses have spent the last year thinking hard about not just why we need to change but how we might do it.

How might we design an exam system that recognises the full range of strengths of every child? This autumn we will be embarking on a series of experiments to test out some fruitful areas of reform - with all welcome to get involved. Those experiments will include ways of evidencing dispositions such as creativity and collaboration and different types of exams e.g. open book, extended exams, that have been so successful this year in universities.

This year we have all been jolted unceremoniously into a different way of working and thinking. What is emerging is something that provides grounds for real optimism, glimmers of light, new ways in which we can all build a better, broader and healthier education system.

An Online Teaching Model for Culinary Arts

Paul Jervis, Head of School for Culinary Arts and **Gary Hunter**, Deputy Executive Principal, Westminster Kingsway College

In January of this year, the UK was once again placed into lockdown. The challenges for all colleges on their vocational programmes when faced with a closure are apparent. The students who choose a career in these areas have a tendency to enjoy the face-to-face practical elements of a programme more than the academic coursework.

At Westminster Kingsway College the Hospitality and Culinary Arts team responded to the closure of the college and movement to online learning with extraordinary professionalism. As much as possible, the students remained on their planned timetables. This was equivalent to what they would experience if they had remained in situ at the college. Due to the nature of the qualification, formal testing was now not possible. For the qualifications, all practical tests and short answer theory questions must be completed in controlled conditions. Planning was immediately put into effect with several return dates and scenarios planned for, to a very tight timescale.

The teaching team continued delivering lessons to the learners with good online interaction. Learning is best undertaken in a social context and it was important

that we kept in touch with our learners. **Alongside the theory lessons now being taught, we kept a practical element alive where possible.** We had knife sharpening demonstrations as well as 'social cooking' events for the learners. For these sessions we invited alumni and friends of the college to join and sometimes lead sessions. It truly became a global affair when a former student joined from Nigeria and taught everyone – including the staff – on her homeland cuisine. We even held our own online culinary competitions.

The highlight of the online model was the organisation of our 'Westminster Chefs Forum'. Each Wednesday afternoon throughout March 2021, we were **joined by a group of celebrated chefs who spoke on topics ranging from career pathways and opportunities** to plant-based food and menu development. The students were able to listen and put questions to the panel which included Alain Roux, Cherish Finden, Brian Turner, Chantelle Nicholson, Simon Boyle, Mark Reynolds, Gary Jones, Chris Galvin, Andrew Aston and Andrew Wong. Each time these sessions were supported by Ben Purton, former Executive Chef at the Royal Lancaster Hotel and industry consultant. To allow the students the opportunity to interact and hear from these people was inspirational.

Since the college reopened, the team have once again **adapted their teaching** to ensure the learners have the skills required to progress. Both the teaching team and the students are delighted to feel the heat of the stoves once again. The restaurants unfortunately remained closed to our customers, but the learners are still honing their skills in a professional environment. Exams are planned as usual for June, and we are on track to see our learners progress to the next level of their courses or into their first full time jobs within the Hospitality Industry.



Universities: delivering meaningful online experiences in assessment and employer engagement

Kat Emms, Senior Policy and Education Researcher, Edge Foundation

Unlike schools and colleges, much of universities' provision has had to continue remotely well into 2021, with still little prospect of learning and teaching returning fully to in-person delivery in the near future.

Unfortunately, this has not boded well with student expectations, with the latest [HEPI student experience survey](#) finding that **the proportion of students who feel they have received 'good' or 'very good' value from their university is at an all-time low** (just over one-in-four), while the proportion whose experience has been worse than expected has more than doubled (HEPI, 2021). At the same time, **job prospects for graduates have worsened**, particularly for those who lack any work experience. Prospects' Early Careers' Survey (2021) found that less than a fifth (17%) of students had undertaken work experience in the last 12 months. However, the majority of students (76%) that managed to secure work experience did find it useful or very useful for developing their skills.

The beginning of the pandemic was challenging for everyone, and we generally witnessed a **knee jerk reaction of shifting materials that were designed for in-person delivery to an online mode**, with much of this being done without considering whether this was indeed the most effective way to deliver content. Although online learning has opened up new possibilities for delivery, working for the majority of time in an online environment has had its challenges for both students and staff. As well as trying to manage **feelings of isolation and increased incidents of mental health problems**, students have been expected to be more academically independent, managing their own time and learning in a way that may never have been expected from them before. For instance, for students, understanding whether they are on the right track with their **learning can sometimes be difficult without the opportunities to reflect with lecturers and peers face-to-face**. Indeed, HEPI's Student Experience Survey (2021) highlighted that the main aspect students said could be improved about their academic experience during the pandemic was the assessment feedback.

The length of lockdowns and broad uncertainty of what is around the corner means staff are now preparing for the unexpected. The changes give higher education lecturers opportunity to fully reflect on their practice and develop learning and assessment that is more suited to an online or blended approach. Lecturers have had opportunity to consider the importance and differentiation between synchronous and asynchronous, and online and in-person activities, to ensure student and staff time together is used most effectively.

Learning and assessment

We spoke with staff from Cardiff University's National Software Academy who had taken this time to reflect on the challenges of online delivery and ways that have worked well, particularly to help **strengthen the learning, assessment and feedback loop** in an online or blended delivery world:

"In-person it is so much easier to check students' understanding there and then, you can ask questions, and students are much more likely to ask questions. I can also pick up on subtle body language to check whether a class or individual student is following or completely lost. That formative assessment I could do by just being in the classroom has not been possible. There's a risk that students that are struggling can fall even further behind."

"I wanted to ensure that students got the most out of their weekly session with me each week, and so tried to make these active Q&A sessions. I set recorded tutorials or reading material for students to do between Teams sessions. I've realised that more frequent check-ins along with frequent formative assessment is what my students need. Time pressure and workload can be a barrier to good assessment but some of the methods that I will now

be implementing include:

- *Reviewing only a sample of student work – feeding back to the whole group the common good and bad points (and if a student is one of the dozen that gets picked out and hasn't done the assignment, then there is a penalty).*
- *Online quizzes can quickly check understanding and give instant feedback.*
- *Peer assessment in group work – anonymised team feedback using mentimeter: 'If you had £100 to distribute as a reward this week, how would you do it across the team (including yourself)?' – That feedback is shared with individuals in our meetings, we then have reflective discussions about what they regard as a valuable team contribution (e.g. turning up on time, offering help, being transparent).*
- *Writing reflective reports – for example, students reflect on what worked well and what they could have done differently.*
- *Feedback comments to students before giving out marks. This gives students more opportunity to self-reflect on their own work.*
- *During team projects, students record on a weekly basis the value they think they contributed to the team, and the work flow they used. They continually reflect on this contribution for the duration of projects."*

Employer engagement activities

Engaging with employers has also been challenging since the start of the pandemic. Employers - and large proportions of some sectors - have been shut down, staff have been furloughed, while some employees have been trying to keep up with the demands of working remotely and other new ways of working. However, **some universities have appreciated the importance of continuing to ensure students gain insight into the world of work** through engaging with employers. We have seen some creative ways by which universities have continued this through the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, staff from the University of Essex's Edge Hotel School (EHS) explain their approach:

"We used our existing connections within the hospitality industry during lockdown. Knowing that many sector experts were temporarily out of work, we took advantage of this by setting up workshops and courses that were run by people from industry. For instance, a large hotel branch

delivered part of their graduate training scheme online to final year EHS students. This meant that, as well as the academic side being able to shift online and continue, on the practical side students were given an immersion into industry and a real understanding of what was going on in industry at the moment, including the traumas they were facing and how managers were thinking about tackling these in the future. At the same time employers were able to increase their profile, particularly to a group of students who were nearly ready to enter the labour market."

"The EHS have also held online community events. This included gathering a range of professionals from the events and hotels industry as a panel of experts. The Q&A session encouraged students to engage and ask questions with professionals."

Moving forward

Although the shift to online delivery has had its challenges, **we have witnessed positive practices develop in universities during lockdown**. Finding the right level of content and the best methods to support delivery can be difficult and varies between courses and between individual students. Elements of online student activity are no doubt here to stay and could be important elements moving forward, offering students essential exposure to how many areas of the world of work now operate.

In some cases, working with employers has seen some struggling to offer the same level of support and engagement with students in the face of uncertainty. On the other hand, the remote working experience has made some sessions and student projects easier to deliver, as communication with students can be undertaken more flexibly.

Finally, we should consider the graduates who have spent much of their university experience learning remotely – will their experiences at university fully prepare them for the workplace they will be going into? And are employers ready to induct and mentor these new graduates, especially when they themselves are working virtually?

UVAC: Higher Education and the Pandemic

Adrian Anderson, Chief Executive, University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC)



Restrictions on student life, bubbling, online learning, cancelled work placements and an uncertain jobs market summarise student life over the last eighteen months.

There are, however, several silver linings for higher education students. The first is in the pandemic employment market, those with higher-level skills have generally fared better than those with lower level skills.

If higher education delivers the skill sets employers demand it will in the medium and long-term deliver for students. The pandemic has underlined the importance of higher-level skills and questioned the past focus of many provider driven lower level training programmes of questionable value in the jobs market. The critical thinking skills and adaptive behaviours developed by degree programmes will continue to equip students for future employment. For recent graduates the job market may be tough, but for those individuals with lower-level skills it will be far tougher. We need more, not less, higher education and higher education to be open to all who can benefit from such provision. **Higher education must however focus on developing the skill sets needed in the employment market.**

Several key higher education programmes have grown in stature during the pandemic. In particular Degree Apprenticeships with the recent push by Government to mainstream the programme. Degree Apprenticeships will help develop the new police constables, registered nurses/healthcare professionals and social workers needed to deliver key public sector services. In the private sector we will see an increasing use by employers of the Degree Apprenticeships they and the country need.

Innovation in the delivery of online and blended learning has also been a feature of the pandemic. Of course, the lack of in-person learning has been of major detriment, but in the long-term the increasing use of digital technology and a **blended learning approach will be a positive trend.**

Universities will also increasingly make use of the occupational standards developed by employers under the auspices of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to support the development of provision. At level 4 (equivalent to the first year of a bachelor's degree) and level 5 (equivalent to the second year of a bachelor's degree), universities will increasingly seek to secure the IfATE quality mark and deliver Higher Technical Qualifications. In coming years, post pandemic, we expect a significant take-up of Higher Technical Qualifications.

So, in summary, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of higher-level skills. In the medium term it **will accelerate the growth of new programmes, Degree Apprenticeships and Higher Technical Qualifications, and innovative approaches to delivery,** which could potentially change educational paradigms for the better.



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