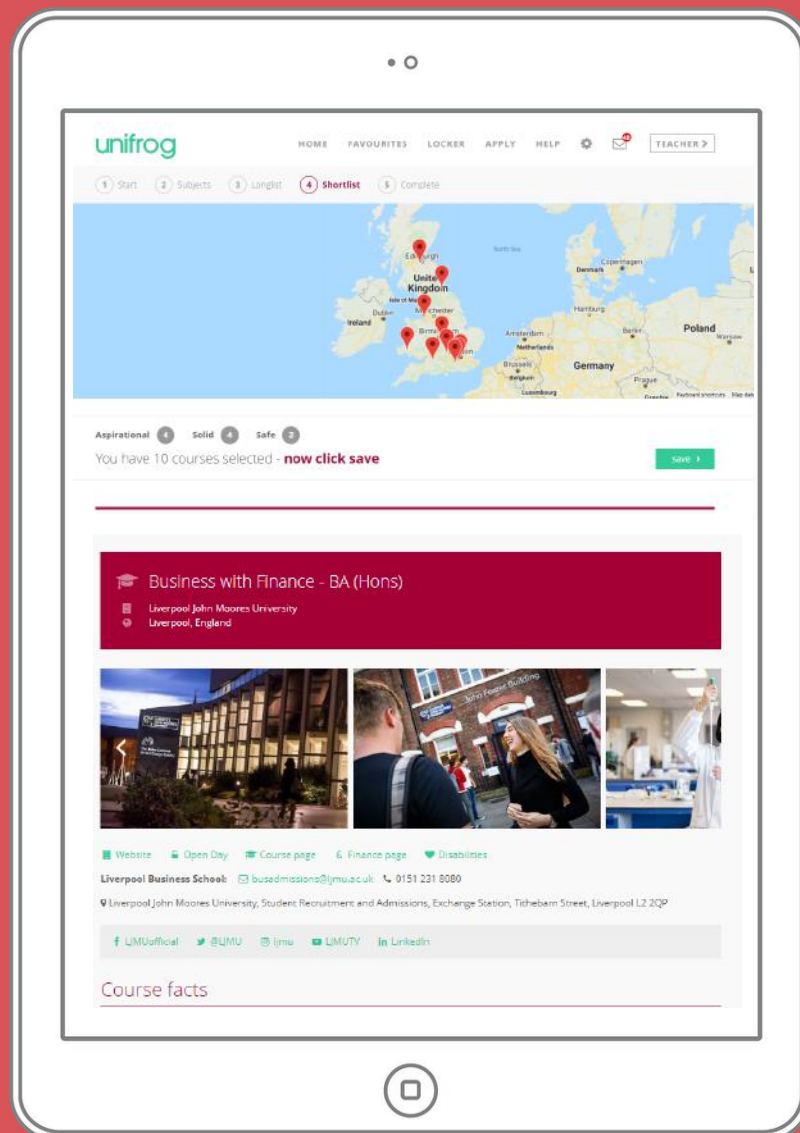


# One year on

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students'  
Higher Education choices and wellbeing



## KEY FINDINGS

1

The proportion of students who believe the pandemic has had a **negative effect on their motivation** to study and do well has **increased steadily** over the past year, from **49% to 67%**.

2

High university application rates look set to continue, with **78%** of Year 12 students **planning to apply to university**.

3

Students from **disadvantaged backgrounds** (and state schools more broadly) have become **more aspirational** in their HE choices over the past year.

4

Students who say they have **good teacher support** are **more likely to plan to go to university** and less likely to be unsure of their plans.

5

**86%** of students say they would **want to attend an in-person open day** if one was on offer, with **94%** saying they're important to **get a feel for the university**.

6

**More than half** of students say they **wouldn't apply** to a university offering **online teaching only**.

7

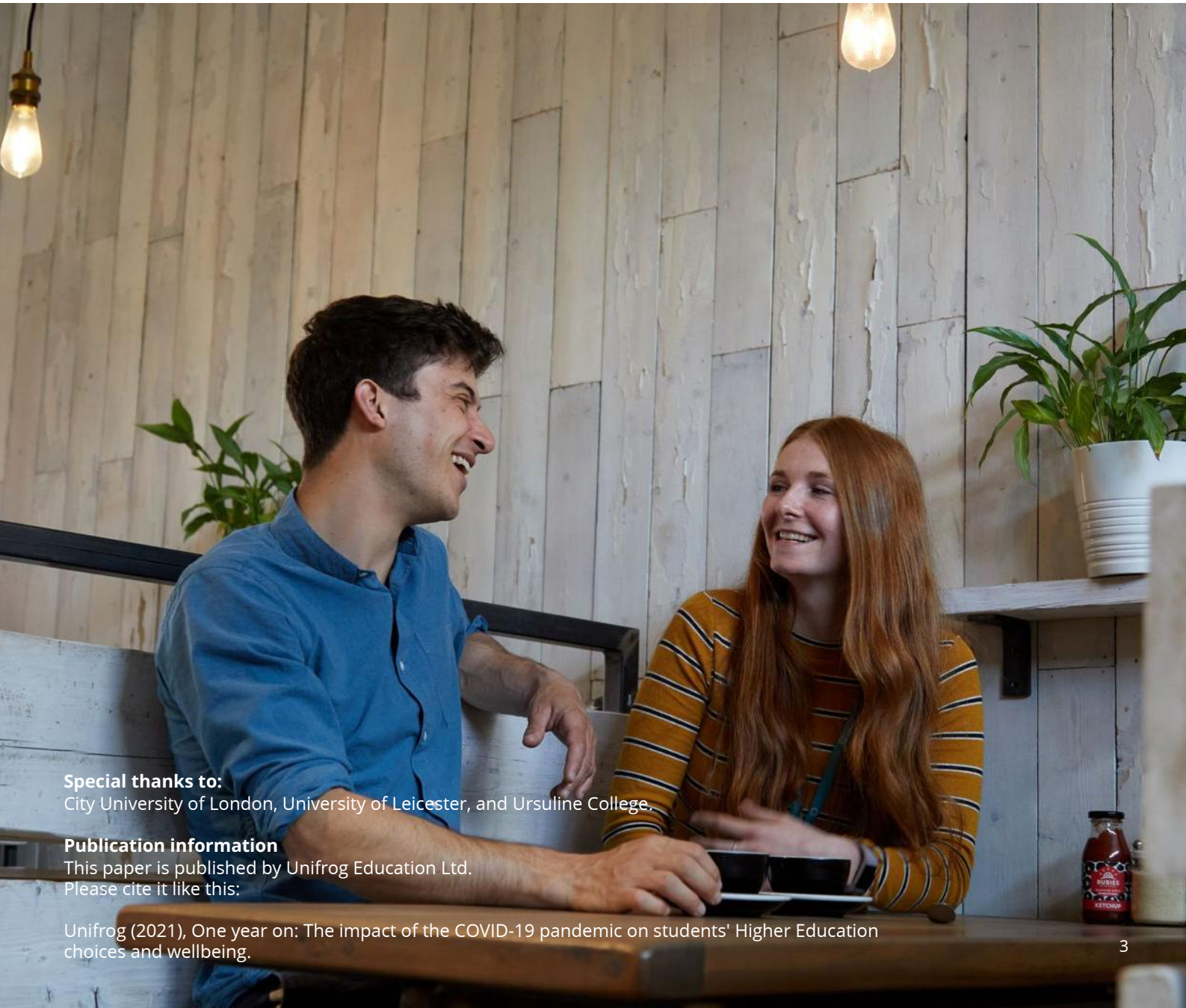
**Business and Management** overtook Psychology during the pandemic to become the **most shortlisted course** on the Unifrog UK universities tool.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the pandemic, we have surveyed students on the Unifrog platform at four key touchpoints. Now, one year on, we're in a unique position to track how their wellbeing, attitudes towards school, and plans for their next steps have changed.

We first surveyed students in April 2020 - just after school across the UK had closed for the first time - and heard their initial reactions to the crisis unfolding around them and the early days of distance learning. Our second survey was in September 2020 as students returned to school in person for the start of a new academic year. Just after the November 'circuit breaker' lockdown, we surveyed them a third time and then again, a year after the first, in April this year just as schools re-opened after the third national lockdown.

This report pulls together the 15,000+ student survey responses we've collected over the past year and analysis of the 700,000 active UK students on the Unifrog platform. We also gathered on-the-ground insights from teachers and careers leads across the UK, as well as experts in student recruitment at the University of Leicester, and City, University of London.

We start by looking at students' aspirations and how they are aiming higher each year, especially students at state schools

and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The 2020 application cycle saw an all-time high for the number of 18-year-olds applying to university, and our data indicates this trend will continue. We also hear from the Head of Student Recruitment and Outreach at the University of Leicester on what they believe to be the key trends for the upcoming application cycle.

In chapter two we examine what it is about university that is important to all these students planning to apply. We look at what they base their decisions on and the demand for in-person experiences, both in terms of open days and teaching when they get to university. We also look at the most popular universities and courses on the Unifrog platform, and how these have changed over the course of the pandemic.

In the third chapter we look at students' wellbeing and how this has fluctuated over the past year. We look at how happiness seems to be linked to how open or restricted society is and the increasingly negative impact of the pandemic on students' motivation to study and do well. In more positive news, we see that feeling as though they have good support from their teachers has been a consistent protective factor for students' motivation at every touchpoint.



# 1 Aspirations: One year on

The pandemic had a notable impact on last year's university applications, triggering a record number of applicants. Despite the university experience looking decidedly different from what many students were expecting, a record number of 18 year olds in the UK both applied and gained a place at university.

In this chapter, we take a look at how the current Year 12s

feel about the prospect of university to see if this trend seems set to continue.

We also explore the encouraging rise of students from state schools and disadvantaged backgrounds shortlisting Russell Group universities and Oxbridge courses on the Unifrog platform, and how teacher support increases the likelihood of a student planning to go to university.





## RECORD UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS LOOK SET TO CONTINUE

The 2020 university application cycle saw a record number of 18 year olds apply (41.5% of the UK 18-year old population) and a record acceptance rate of 89.1%<sup>1</sup>.

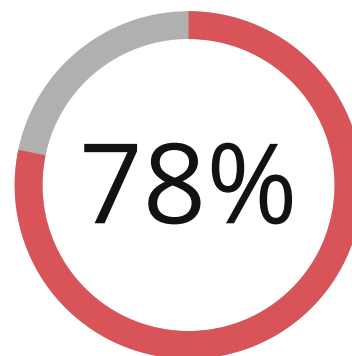
This was the result of a number of factors. Students saw university as a stable option during a period of great uncertainty in the labour market, more students met the terms of their offers as a result of 'centre assessed grades' than they would have done if exams had gone ahead, and the government boosted capacity across institutions.

Our data suggests this upward trend in applications will continue. Over three quarters of the Year 12 students we surveyed (78%) plan on going to university while only 7% say they don't plan on it, with a further 15% not sure.

While it's great that so many young people see university as a viable option, the number of students applying is at a record high while the information available to universities to fairly choose between applicants is at a low.

Figure 1.1

What proportion of Year 12 students plan to apply to university?



Teachers have had reduced contact time with students and the level of formal assessments on which teacher-assessed grades are based varies between different schools.

There are also concerns that high-achieving students are missing out on places at high-ranking universities this year.

This is because large numbers chose to defer their place from last year and teacher-assessed A-levels are again expected to result in far more students netting top grades this August<sup>2</sup>. Universities have to take all students who meet their offers, and with social distancing restrictions likely to continue to place a strain on facilities, many top universities have made fewer offers than in previous years.

Remember that if students find themselves without a university place, they can use Clearing to apply to courses that still have spaces available, from 5 July to 19 October 2021.

### UNIFROG TOP TIP

Students can use the new Unifrog Clearing tool from 5 July to search and save courses so they're in the best position possible on Results day, whatever happens.



<sup>1</sup> UCAS, 2020. *What happened to the Covid cohort? Lessons for levelling up in 2021 and beyond.*

<sup>2</sup> Fazackerley, A., 2021. *Top pupils rejected by universities in A-levels fiasco fallout.* The Guardian.

## WHERE YOU COME FROM

According to UCAS end-of-cycle data for last year, more UK students from disadvantaged backgrounds gained a university place than ever before<sup>1</sup>. This was reflected across all universities and courses, including the most selective.

We wanted to look at whether a student’s background affected how aspirational they were in their research on the Unifrog platform and if the pandemic had impacted their behaviour.

We looked at the proportion of students on the platform predicted to get 3Bs or higher at A-level who shortlisted a Russell Group university. Over the last three years, the proportion of students at independent schools to do so has remained steady at 96%.

Meanwhile, the proportions of students from state schools and disadvantaged backgrounds (students in POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2) have steadily risen one percentage point each year, to 88% and 85% respectively.

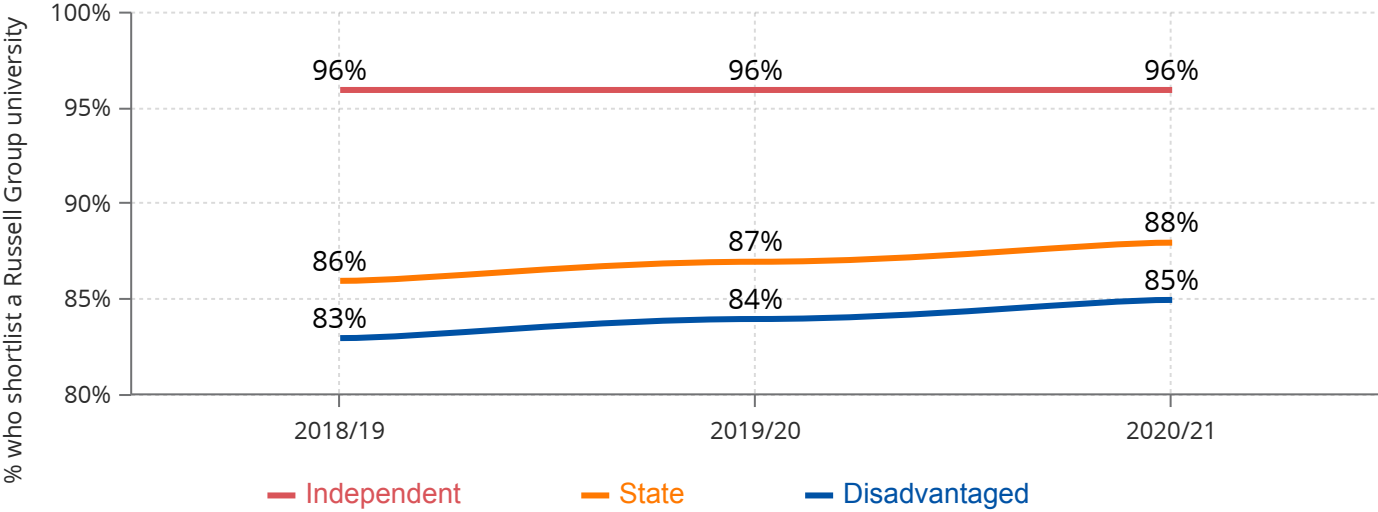


### UNIFROG TOP TIP

Start to deliver CEIAG lessons to introduce HE pathways early on in a student’s education journey. This should increase aspirations, and raise awareness of the many opportunities available to them.

Figure 1.2

What proportion of students predicted to get 3Bs+ at A-level shortlisted a Russell Group university from March 2020 - March 2021, compared to the same period in previous years?



<sup>1</sup> UCAS, 2020. What happened to the Covid cohort? Lessons for levelling up in 2021 and beyond.



WHERE YOU COME FROM CONT.

We also looked at the proportion of students predicted 3As+ at A-level who shortlisted a course at Oxford or Cambridge.

While the proportion of students at independent schools has dropped slightly from 55% to 54%, the proportions of state and disadvantaged students have risen three percentage points each, to 41% and 37% respectively. While the numbers are moving in the right direction, there's still a long way to go to close the gap.

It's also important to remember that disadvantaged students may need continued support to access selective universities.

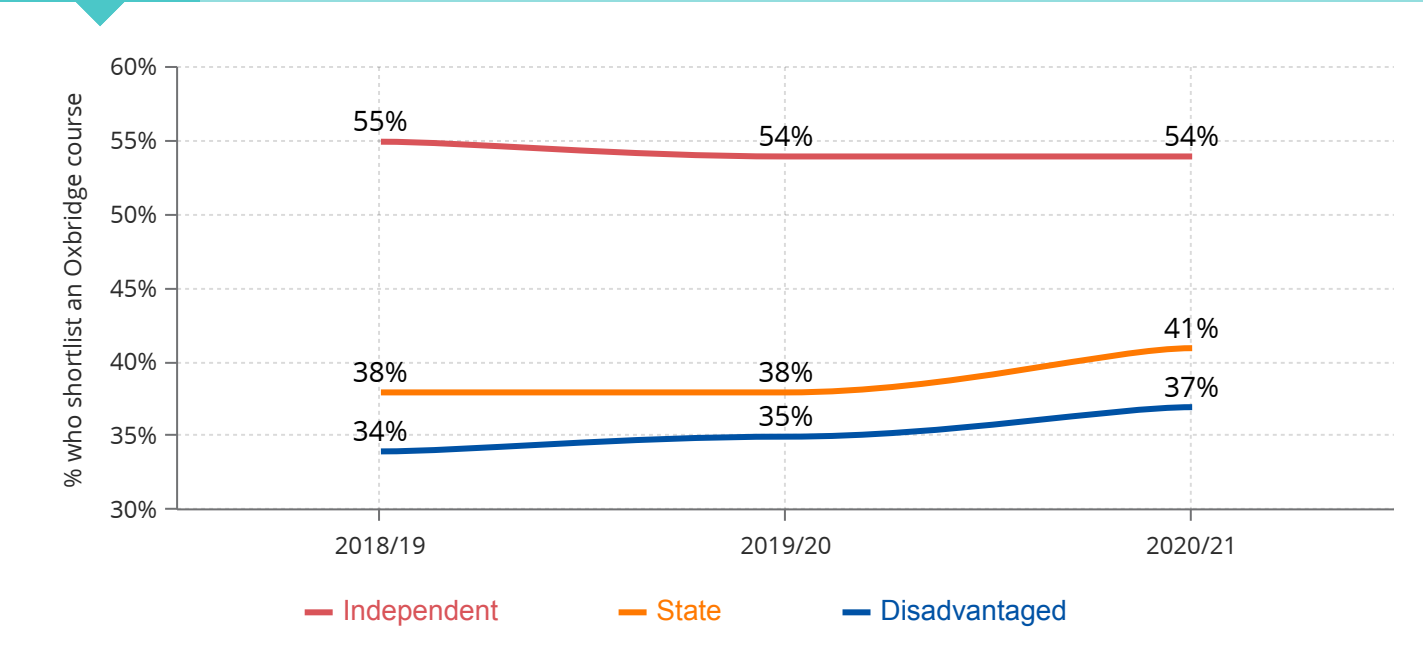
Research from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Department for Education has shown that disadvantaged students a're more likely to have experienced significant disruption to their education over the past year<sup>1</sup>.

It's also key to make sure that students are aware of contextual offers and what they could mean for them. Universities make contextual offers - often up to two grades below the standard entry requirements - to students who otherwise may be less likely to gain a place there in order to attract students from all backgrounds.

UNIFROG TOP TIP

The Unifrog Special opportunities tool helps students to search for contextual offers and gives them information on what the contextual offer is, eligibility, and application deadlines.

Figure 1.3 What proportion of students predicted to get 3As+ at A-level shortlisted an Oxbridge course from March 2020 - March 2021, compared to the same period in previous years?



<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, 2021. *Pupils' progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: interim report.*



TEACHER SUPPORT

While students find it most useful to talk to family members about their future plans, almost half (47%) find it useful to talk to teachers and careers advisors, highlighting the essential role of CEIAG in schools.

We also found that students who report feeling they have good levels of support from their teachers are 5% more likely to say they plan to go to university and less likely to be unsure of their plans. This suggests that having good support from teachers helps students to feel more certain about their next steps.

Students who want to go to university are also 11% more likely to report feeling optimistic about the future. In contrast, the students least likely to report feeling optimistic are those who are unsure of their plans.

UNIFROG TOP TIP

Goal setting helps students to stay optimistic about their futures. Support students to create a plan with short and longer term goals, and regularly review progress. The 'Goal setting' session in the Resources library is a great starting point!

This means that having a solid plan for the future gives students something to work towards, and appears to have helped them to stay more positive over the past year.



Figure 1.4 What proportion of students find it useful to talk to teachers and careers advisors about their plans?

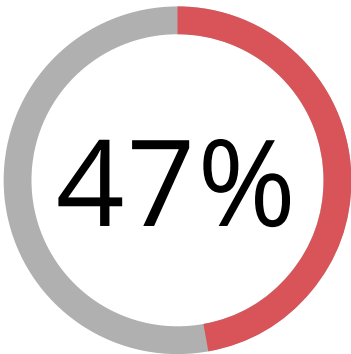
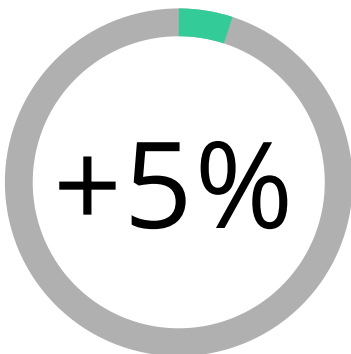


Figure 1.5 What's the impact of feeling they have good support on the likelihood a student plans to go to university?



NERVOUS AND EXCITED, BUT UNPREPARED

With so many students planning on going to university, how do they feel about it?

Out of the 4,500+ students we surveyed, over two thirds (69%) feel nervous, with 59% feeling excited.

Almost half of the students we asked (46%) feel unprepared for the prospect of going to university, suggesting that more can be done to ease the transition from school to university and help students feel ready.

We then asked the students who said they were planning on applying to university how they feel about different factors. Students are least concerned about the impact of social distancing on the overall university experience, with 40% saying this is a concern for them.

However, 57% are concerned about the impact of social distancing on their course, and 65% about its impact on making friends.

UNIFROG TOP TIP

We've added new guides, written in collaboration with universities, to the 'Post application' section of the Know-how library to help students prepare for the transition.

It appears that these concerns are not unfounded. An ONS survey of current university students found that almost a third (31%) of students are dissatisfied with the academic experience at their university since the start of the academic term with over half (55%) dissatisfied with their social experience<sup>1</sup>.

However, both these figures have fallen from January 2021 when they were at 45% and 64% respectively. This suggests that universities are improving their provision and/or students are getting used to the new university experience.

Figure 1.5 How do students feel about the prospect of going to university?

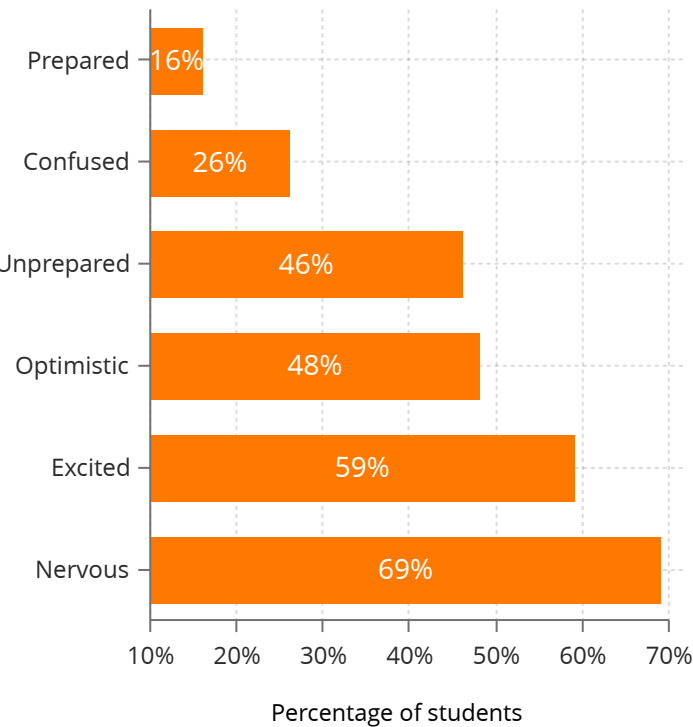
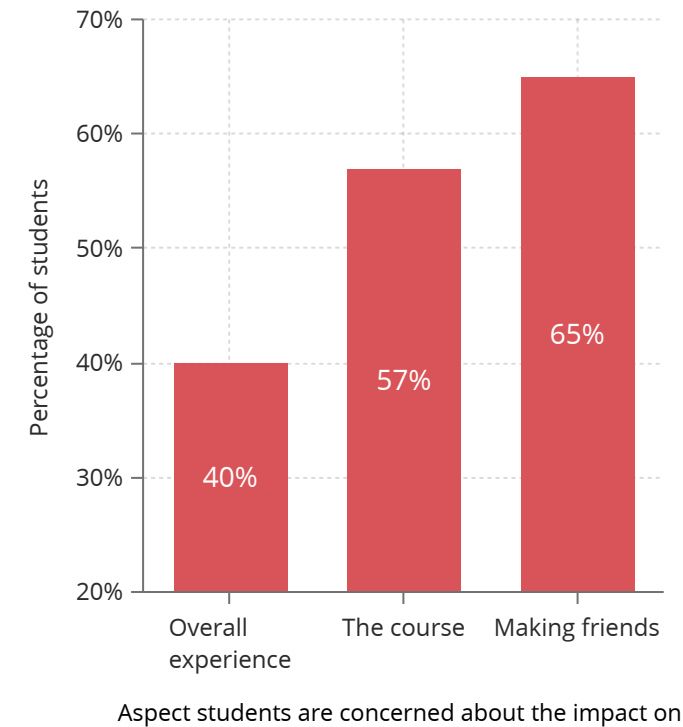


Figure 1.6 What proportion of students are concerned about social distancing affecting aspects of university?



<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, 2021. *Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 19 February to 1 March 2021*

## EXPERT VIEW



### Elliot Newstead

#### Head of UK Student Recruitment and Outreach

The University of Leicester, a research university in one of the UK's most diverse cities, turns 100 this year.

Elliot gives us his take on what the university application cycle might look like next year, and what the current Year 12s need to be aware of.

### Informed choices

More than ever, students making an informed choice about their future is of vital importance. Using Unifrog, creating a personal 'this is what I'm looking for from my uni choices' spreadsheet and using other channels such as university websites to help collate this information will benefit students hugely.

**Top tip** – set quick quizzes and challenges around uni research to show how easily this information can be found.

### Into the unknown

Predicting the 2022 cohort behaviour is challenging but one thing is for certain; demand for places at universities will increase. This \*might\* mean a slight delay in offer making, it \*might\* mean certain institutions are more impacted than others, we just don't know at this stage.

**Top tip** - the Unifrog Facebook group is a great source of information on the latest updates from across the sector.

### Show yourself

Universities will be moving back towards providing students with physical opportunities to visit their campuses across the Summer and Autumn. As good as digital events have been, nothing quite replaces that feeling of seeing a campus for the first time.

**Top tip** - Booking will be essential as there may be stricter capacity limits in place than at Open Days gone by.

### The next right thing

No university choice is ever 100% guaranteed to be the right one. Along with visiting, the best way for students to get a sense whether X degree at Y university is right for them is to chat to current students. Most unis now have peer to peer chat opportunities available on their website. Some will be very obvious, some might be a few clicks in, but all will be worth a look.

**Top tip** – encourage your students to ask anything and everything. Our students love to help.



## KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND CAREERS LEADS

1

Be aware of students' intended destinations as early as possible and support students who are unsure of their next steps use the Unifrog libraries, Apprenticeship search tool, and University search tools to start thinking about their options

2

Encourage students in Year 13 without a university place to use the new Unifrog Clearing tool from 5 July to search and save courses so that they're in the best position possible on Results day, whatever happens.

3

Start to deliver CEIAG lessons to introduce HE pathways early on in a student's education journey. This will raise aspirations, and raise awareness of the many opportunities available to them. The 'Subject library treasure hunt' and 'Post 16 - Choices, choices' sessions from the Unifrog Resources library are good places to start.

4

Support students to create a plan with short and longer term goals, and regularly check in with them to review progress. Goal setting not only motivates students initially, but helps to maintain their motivation.

5

Run the remote 'Moving away to University' session from the Resources library and direct students to the 'Settling in' section of the Know-how library to help them prepare for the transition to university.

## 2 Higher Education: One year on

With 78% of the Year 12s on the Unifrog platform saying they plan on going to university, this chapter explores the factors that go into making decisions around Higher Education.

In addition to finding it easier to concentrate back in the classroom, students are keen for a return to in-person experiences when it comes to Higher Education. This

is true of both university open days and teaching.

The past year has changed which courses and institutions students shortlist on the UK universities tool with Business and Management now the most popular degree. We get City, University of London's take on why this might be and what students can do to make their university application stand out from the crowd.

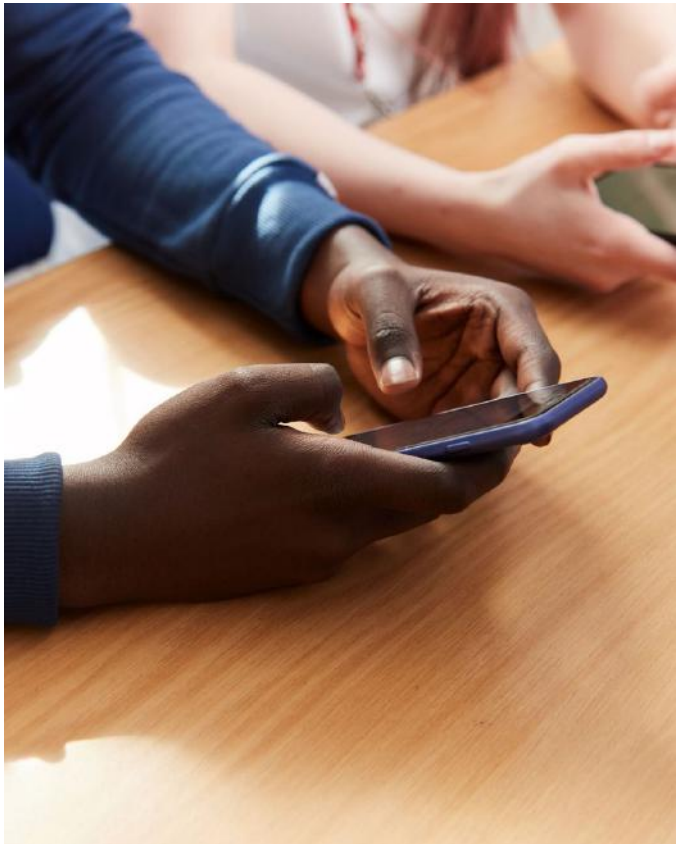


## DECIDING WHERE TO GO

With in-person open days - usually one of the main ways students decide which universities to apply to - off the cards, universities have had to find other ways for students to explore their universities.

We asked students what they found most useful when deciding where to apply. University websites are the clear winner, with 82% of students finding them useful.

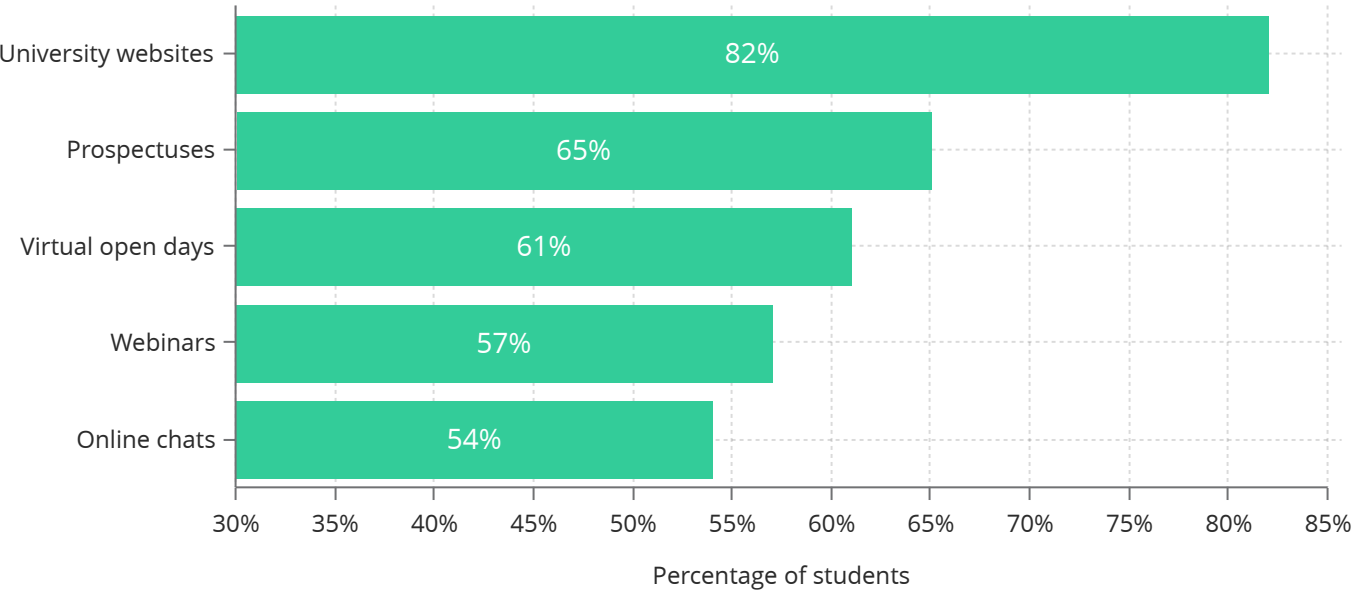
Despite universities investing in online chats significantly over the past year, students rate them the least helpful, with only 54% saying they're useful.



### UNIFROG TOP TIP

Encourage students to follow the links to university websites on the UK universities tool to help them make an informed decision about where to apply.

**Figure 2.1** What proportion of students find different sources of information useful when researching universities?





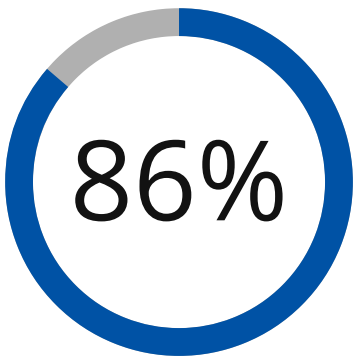
OPEN TO OPEN DAYS

While alternatives have helped plug the gap over the past year, it's clear students believe nothing can fully replace an in-person open day. An overwhelming majority (86%) of students say they would attend one if it was an option! 17% were unsure and only 7% said they wouldn't want to attend one if it was on offer.

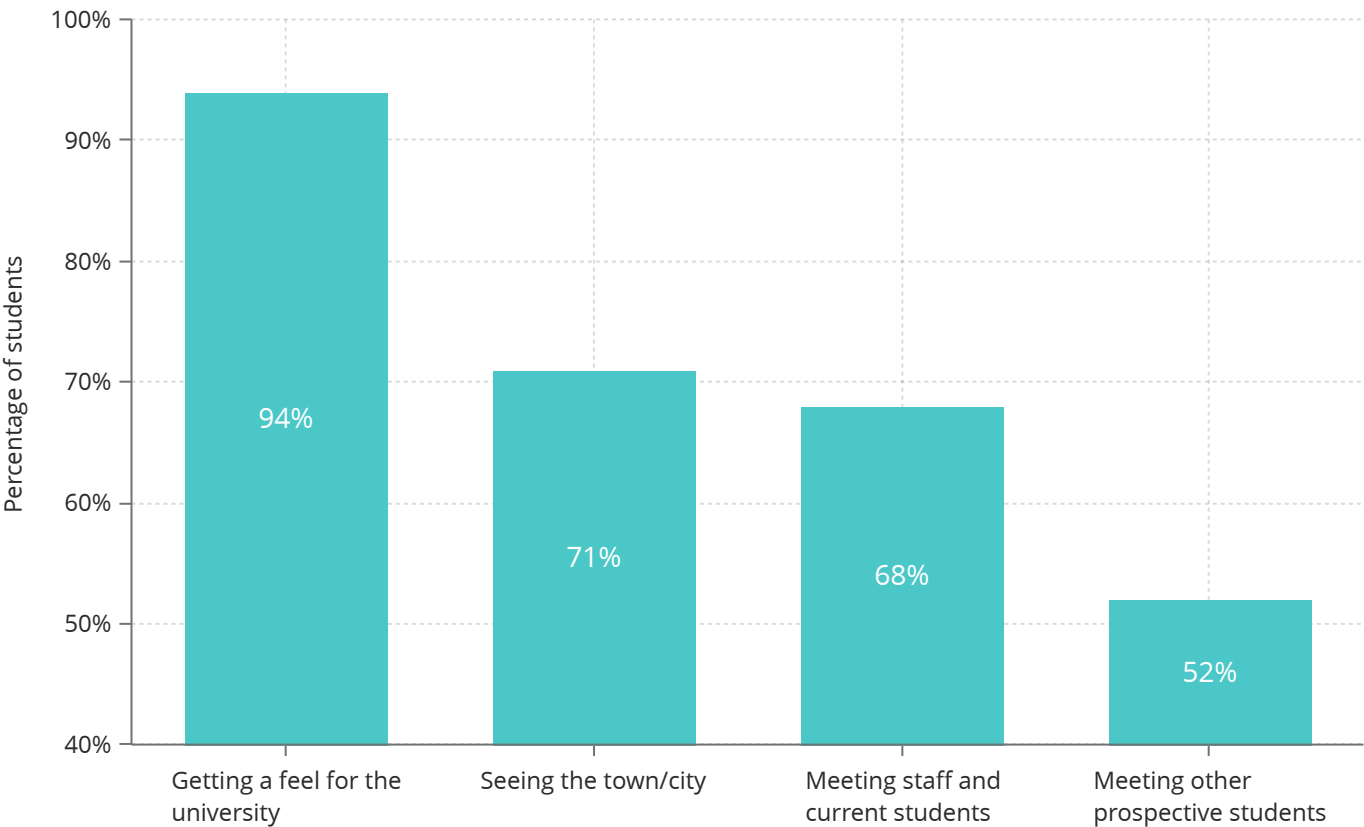
When asked why they're so keen to attend an in-person open day, almost all the respondents (94%) cited getting a feel for the university as important while 71% also said they wanted to see the town or city where the university was based.

It's clear from these responses why virtual open days haven't replaced the in-person experience as both of these aspects are impossible to replicate virtually, however hard a university tries.

**Figure 2.2** What proportion of students would attend an in-person open day if it was on offer?



**Figure 2.3** What reasons do students give for wanting to attend an in-person open day?



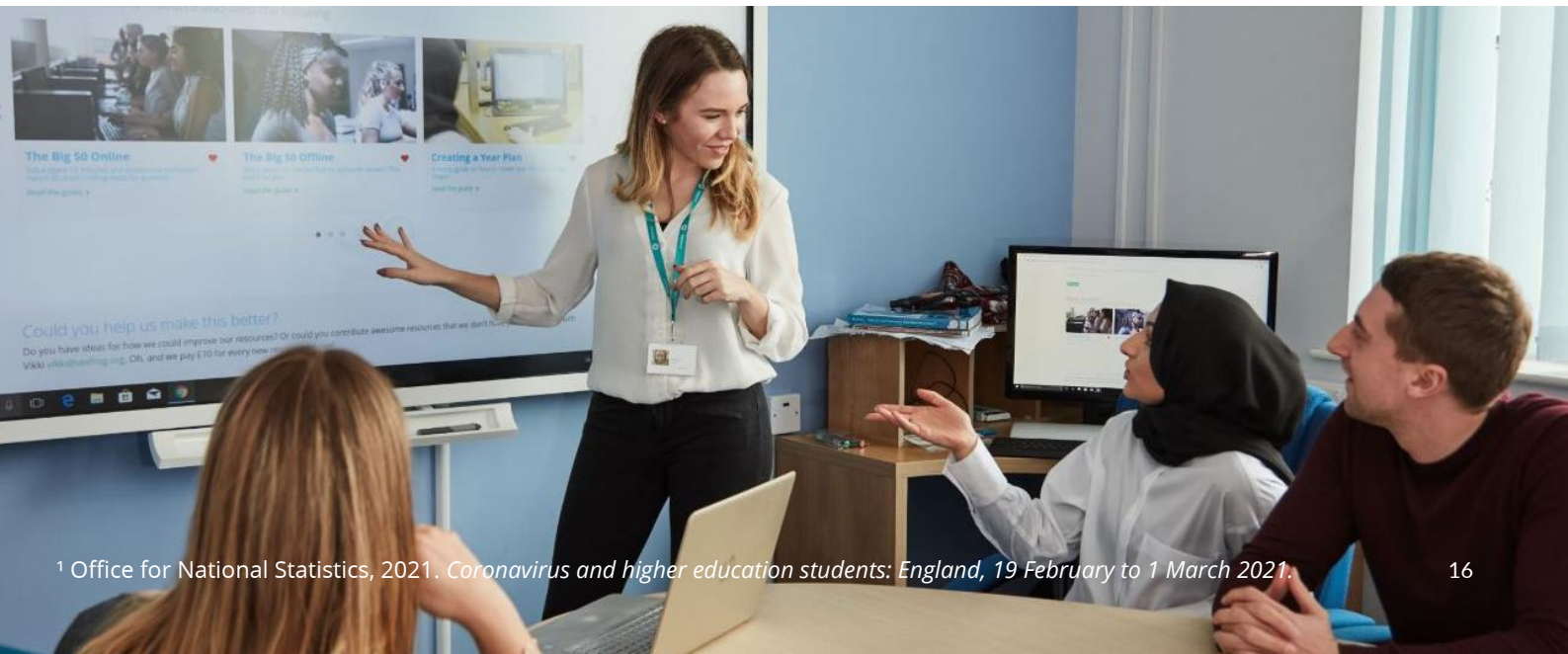
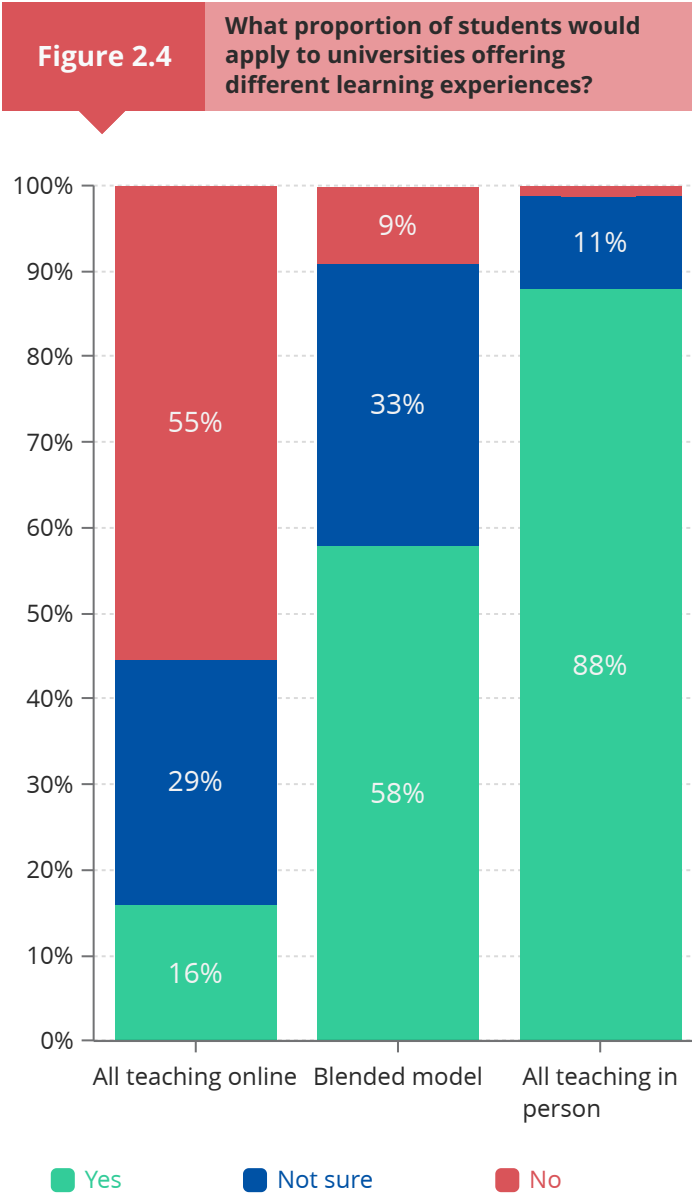
DEMAND FOR IN-PERSON TEACHING

In addition to the demand for in-person open days, students are desperate for in-person teaching when they get to university. To emphasise just how strongly students feel about this, over half (55%) say they definitely wouldn't apply to a university offering online teaching only.

When asked if they would apply to universities offering different learning experiences, the majority (88%) would apply somewhere offering all teaching in person and 58% would apply somewhere offering a blend of in-person and online teaching.

Students are right to carefully consider how their courses will be delivered as a recent ONS survey found that three-quarters (75%) of all students reported that scheduled live online lessons or lectures was the most common form of distance learning adopted by their university since the start of the 2020 autumn term. Over half (56%) of students who started in Higher Education prior to the pandemic reported that the lack of face-to-face learning over the last year had had a major or moderate impact on the quality of their course.

With the deadline for students to accept offers approaching, universities need to meet Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) requirements by providing students with detailed information about their offer. This will include information on teaching provision and will hopefully give students a better idea of what the learning experience will look like at different universities in September.



<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, 2021. *Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 19 February to 1 March 2021.*

## BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT TAKES TOP SPOT

Over the course of the pandemic, Business and Management overtook Psychology to become the most popular subject on the Unifrog UK universities tool. Over the past year, a total of 23,166 students in the UK shortlisted a Business and Management course.

The other winners were History, which rose four places over the last year, and Marketing, which gained six places to enter

the top 20 for the first time.

Despite the rising popularity of History and Languages, Linguistics, and Literature on the Unifrog platform, a consultation by the Office for Students (OfS) and the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, suggested halving the amount spent on “high cost” Higher Education arts subjects in England – which it said were not “strategic priorities”.

**Figure 2.5**

**The top 20 most shortlisted subjects on the Unifrog UK Universities search tool from March 2020 - March 2021, compared to the same period in the previous year.**

Rank	Subject	No. of students who shortlisted	Rank change
1	Business and Management	23,166	+1
2	Psychology	22,567	-1
3	Medical and Health Sciences	21,215	0
4	Politics and International Relations	17,168	+1
5	Law and Law Studies	15,712	+1
6	Economics	15,298	+1
7	Liberal Arts and Sciences	14,969	-3
8	Biology and Biological Sciences	12,994	0
9	Medicine	12,582	0
10	History	10,563	+4
11	Languages, Linguistics, and Literature	9,977	+2
12	Engineering	9,655	-2
13	Mathematics	9,322	-2
14	Computer Sciences and AI	9,163	-2
15	Nursing and Midwifery	8,041	+2
16	Anatomy, Physiology, Pathology	7,667	-1
17	Accounting	7,033	+1
18	Finance	6,952	+3
19	Media and Communications	6,906	+1
20	Marketing	6,669	+6



## EXPERT VIEW

CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON**Kat Knight****UK Student Recruitment and Schools Liaison  
Manager**

City, University of London is located in the heart of London. Their courses are focused on business and the professions, supporting students with their transition to the world of work.

Kat explains why Business courses are so popular, and how students applying for them can stand out.

**Why are Business courses so popular?**

- **The uncertainty of the pandemic** – with a looming recession comes worry about job security. Business courses provide a broad foundation in a lot of areas which students can apply to many fields of work that keep their options open.
- **Flexible career opportunities** – the variety of content means students are set up well to change jobs and industries, and can work for a company or set up their own business.
- **Range of courses** – many universities will offer multiple pathways for Business (at City we do six) that often share a first year and provide flexibility to move pathways, keeping options open.

**How can students prepare a stand out application?**

The key to standing out in the Personal Statement is to demonstrate how the student has gone above the sixth form syllabus to prepare for the degree.

It's important to discuss their sixth form studies, but everyone has this element to talk about so students need to show that they are committed to the subject in their own time as well.

There are lots of ways they can do this; some top suggestions would be:

- **Engaging in university taster sessions** – these can be in person or online, and are a great way to experience a subject at university level. Tasters will usually be a mini workshop or lecture and students can then discuss what they learnt from this in their statement.
- **Reading around their subject** – we recommend students look on university course pages and check the first-year modules, and then do some reading around these topics. This shows initiative and willingness to go beyond their sixth form learning.
- **Watching documentaries or listening to podcasts** – relevant documentaries and podcasts can be a great insight into the subject at a higher level, and provide some interesting topics to discuss in the statement.

The really important element of this is to reflect on these experiences. Listing 30 different extracurricular activities is not as interesting as doing two or three and letting us know why these experiences were useful.

## UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER RETAINS ITS CROWN

When we look at the most popular institutions on the Unifrog platform, the University of Manchester retained top spot, with 33,455 students shortlisting at least one course there, from March 2020 - March 2021.

The University of Exeter rose in popularity to become the second most popular institution, with Leeds dropping down to third place. Looking at the top 20, Bristol and Liverpool both suffered the biggest falls, each dropping down four places.

We wanted to see what was important to students deciding which courses to apply for, so we looked at which factors they use to rank courses on the UK universities search tool.

During the course of the pandemic, use of the salary rank and QS world rank have seen the biggest growth. It's likely that the crisis has made students more aware of the importance of financial security and are seeking highly regarded universities and courses that lead to a high graduate salary.

Interestingly, there's been a big increase in the average number of universities each student shortlists, with each student now shortlisting an average of 0.4 more institutions than before the pandemic.

This suggests students are less certain of where they want to apply, perhaps as a result of being unable to visit universities in person this year.

### UNIFROG TOP TIP

Get students to research university courses early. The more time they have to research and shortlist courses, the more informed their choices will be. They will also have a defined goal in place which will help maintain their motivation and boost their aspirations.

**Figure 2.6**

**The top 10 most shortlisted universities on the Unifrog UK Universities search tool from March 2020 - March 2021, compared to the same period in 2019/2020.**

Rank	University	No. of students who shortlisted	Rank change
1	University of Manchester	31,501	0
2	University of Exeter	28,090	+2
3	University of Leeds	27,433	-1
4	University of Bristol	26,540	-1
5	UCL (University College London)	26,273	+1
6	King's College London	26,157	+2
7	Durham University	25,779	-2
8	University of Edinburgh	23,589	+1
9	University of Nottingham	23,272	-2
10	University of Oxford	21,142	+3

# 3 Wellbeing: One year on

The last 15 months have been exceptionally difficult for many, and young people have been among the hardest hit.

Young Minds, the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health, found that 67% of young people believe that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health<sup>1</sup>.

In this chapter, we look at how lockdown restrictions have affected students' happiness and the impact of the pandemic on students' motivation. We also explore the ongoing importance of support from teachers and how, despite finding it easier to concentrate in the classroom, students are still finding some aspects of the return to school difficult to adjust to, especially wearing masks.



<sup>1</sup>Young Minds, 2021. *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs.*



## THE HIT TO MOTIVATION AND HAPPINESS

Over the past year, students’ happiness appears to fluctuate in line with how relatively open or ‘locked down’ society is. While students consistently rate their happiness over the past few days at around 5 out of 10, they report slightly lower levels of happiness during lockdowns (4.9) and higher levels of happiness (5.2) when restrictions are lifted.

On the other hand, the negative impact on students’ motivation has become more pronounced as the pandemic has gone on. The proportion of students who believe that the pandemic has had a negative effect on their motivation to study and do well has increased steadily over the past year. When we first surveyed students at the start of the pandemic, 49% of students reported that their motivation had been negatively impacted. One year later, this has risen to 67%.

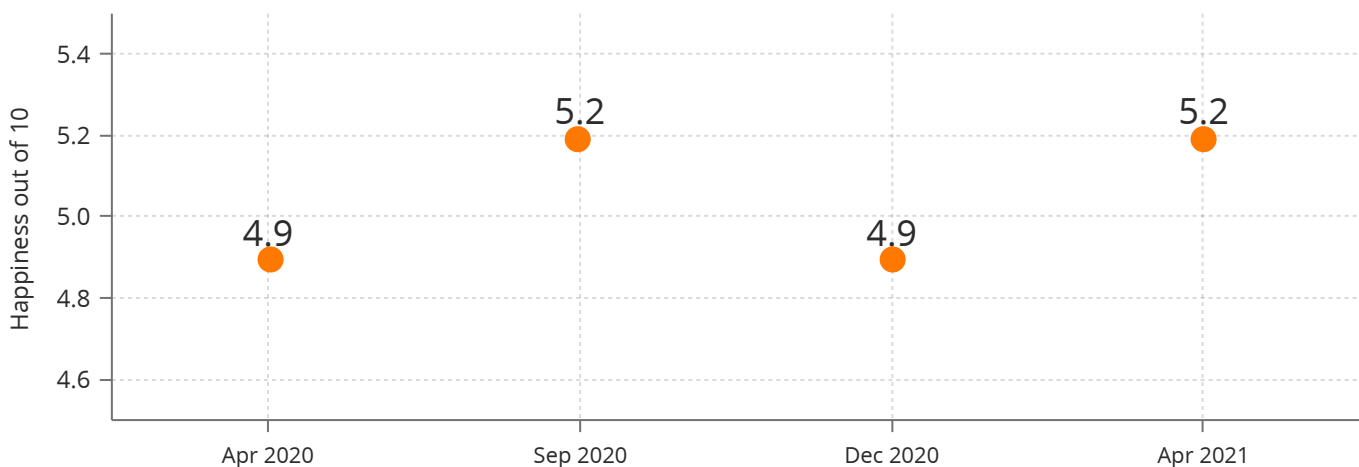


### UNIFROG TOP TIP

We have 40+ student guides in the Wellbeing section of the Know-how library to help students understand mental health, recognise signs of common mental health problems, and know where to access support.

Figure 3.1

Out of 10, how have students rated their happiness over the past year?



THE HIT TO MOTIVATION AND HAPPINESS CONT.



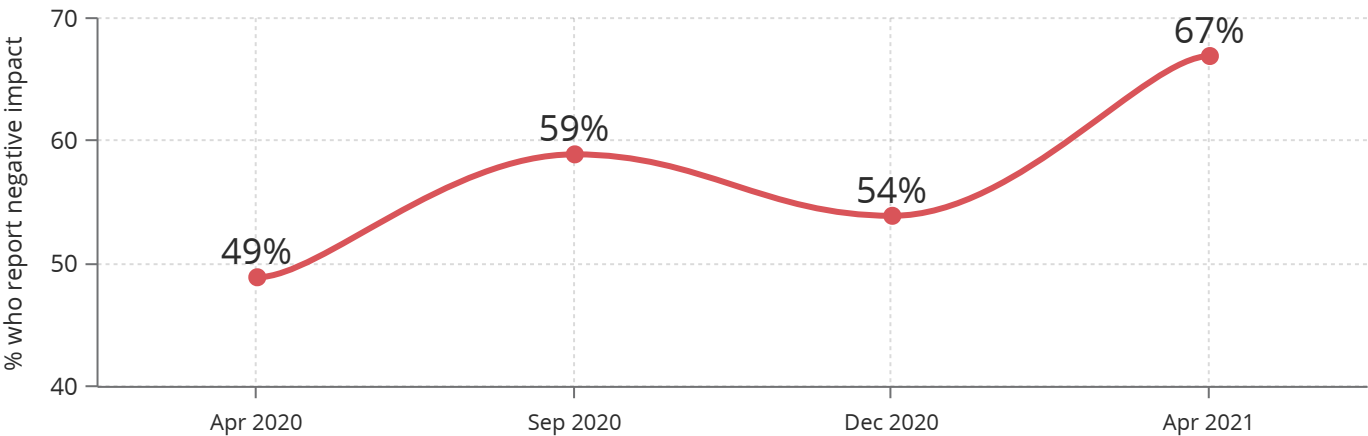
This impact on happiness and motivation ties in with Young Minds’ survey which found that 75% of respondents reported that the January 2021 lockdown was harder to cope with than previous lockdowns, with 44% saying it was ‘much harder’<sup>1</sup>. On a more positive note, over three quarters of the young people surveyed (79%) believe that their mental health will start to improve once the majority of restrictions are lifted, although they remain cautious about the speed this happens and the possibility of future lockdowns.

The Resolution Foundation - an independent think-tank focused on improving living standards for those on low to middle incomes - points out that the last year has exaggerated pre-existing trends, rather than being a new phenomenon.

Their Double Trouble report marks the beginning of a three-year research programme investigating the links between the labour market and the mental health of young people<sup>2</sup>. While the report found that young people have been undeniably hard hit compared to other age groups during the pandemic, even before March 2020 young people were more likely to have a mental health problem compared to ten years ago. This suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated issues that were already affecting young people’s mental health.

Figure 3.2

What proportion of students have reported that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their motivation to study and do well over the past year?



<sup>6</sup> Young Minds, 2021. Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs.

<sup>2</sup> Resolution Foundation, 2021. *Double trouble: Exploring the labour market and mental health impact of Covid-19 on young people.*

TEACHER SUPPORT REMAINS IMPORTANT

Throughout the pandemic, teacher support has consistently been a protective factor for students’ motivation.

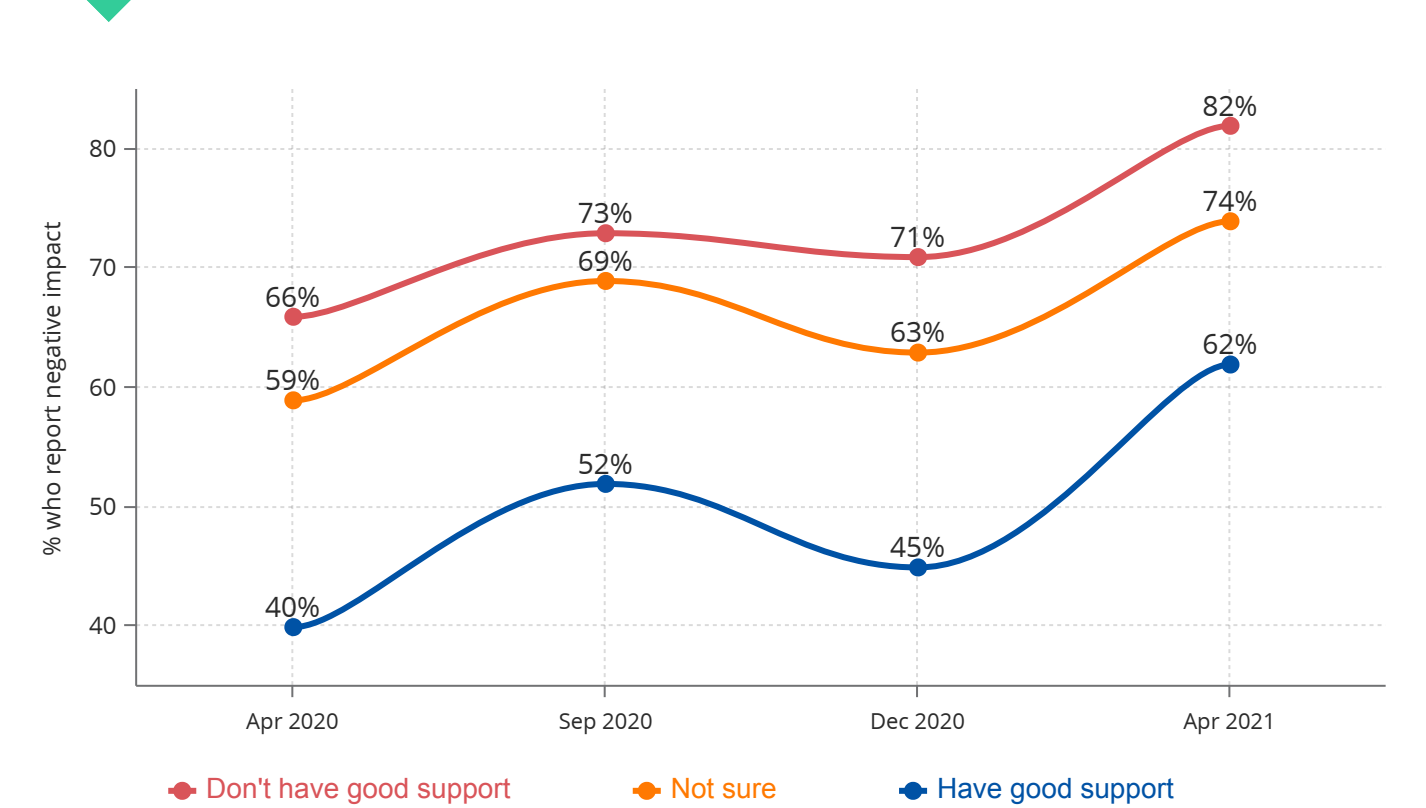
Regardless of age or gender, students who feel as though they have good levels of support from their teachers are less likely to report that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their motivation.

Reassuringly two thirds (66%) of students feel they have good levels of support from their teachers at the moment. Only 13% don't feel they have good levels of support, and a further 21% are not sure.

Parents agree with their children. Ofsted’s annual parents survey found that while two thirds of parents are worried about their child’s mental health as a result of the pandemic, nine in ten think that their child’s school has handled the pandemic well<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 3.3** How has whether students feel they have good levels of support from their teachers impacted the likelihood they are to report their motivation has been negatively impacted over the last year?



<sup>6</sup> YouGov, 2021. Ofsted Parents Annual Survey 2021.

## EXPERT VIEW



### Johnny Joyce

**Curriculum Leader for Social Sciences and  
Deputy Head of Sixth Form**

Ursuline College is a Roman Catholic 11-19 school that remained committed to providing 121 support to students during the pandemic to help them make informed choices about what to do after school.

### One to one university support

We make sure that we meet with all our students 121 to talk about their plans for when they finish school. We use 20-minute blocks of time to discuss different aspects of applying to university.

For example, using the Unifrog personality profiling tool to help make decisions, using the Personal Statement and Notes to Reference Writers tools to get their applications materials ready, and the Read Watch Listen tool to find content to talk about in their Personal Statements.

### Early start

We've already met with all our Year 12s individually so they know they have our support and can start to think about their next steps. We also wanted to reassure them that they won't miss out on any university support as a result of the disruption of the past year.

### Shift to online

We replicated this support online when school was closed using Microsoft Teams. It worked really well and helped us to maintain the quality of these interactions. Screen sharing was invaluable in the run up to deadline day to show students quickly what needed changing on their statements.

### Here to stay

We'll definitely keep using some aspects of online learning. I found the sessions were more efficient online and so I was able to see more students, more regularly.

It was also great to have parents more involved in the process. It helped them feel in the loop as they were able to engage with their child's application and ask questions.

### Maintaining motivation

We help students stay motivated by encouraging them to be aware of the grades they need to achieve. We write their UCAS offers at the top of some of their bigger pieces of work, so they're always front of mind and motivate them to work hard.

### Transition to university

We run a transition programme with our Year 13s. It's tailored for students who are going to uni and those who aren't so that all students are ready and feel prepared.

There's a great Futurelearn MOOC from the University of East Anglia (UEA) that we've set for students to complete during the summer term. It's called 'Preparing for uni' and helps them develop the skills they'll need at university.



BACK TO SCHOOL

We asked students where they find it easiest to concentrate after a year of spending significant stretches of time having lessons both at home and in the classroom. 63% told us they find it easier to concentrate at school. 21% find it easier at home, and 16% said there's no difference.

Despite finding it easier to concentrate at school, students are finding aspects of the 'new normal' difficult to get to grips with. We asked students how they felt about being back in the school building when they returned at the start of the academic year and again in April 2021 once schools reopened following the third national lockdown.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given it's where many find it easier to concentrate, there hasn't been much change in the proportion of students finding it difficult to adapt to having lessons in a classroom again, which rose from 7% to 10%. Compared to being back in the classroom, students are finding it more difficult to adjust to social distancing, although the proportion feeling this way has dropped from 28% to 26%.

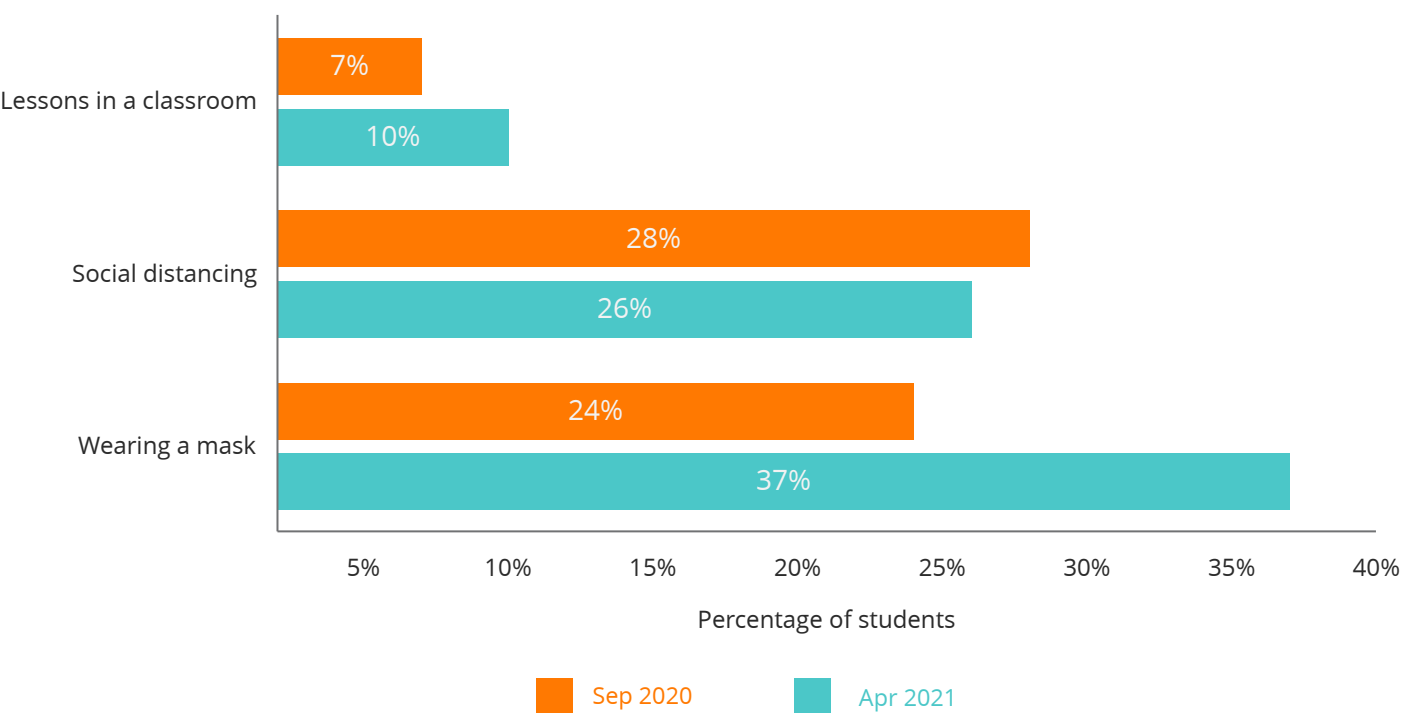
The one aspect of being back in school that students are struggling with the most is face coverings, with over a third of students (37%) finding face masks difficult to adjust to.

The Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza recognised how difficult some students have found masks, saying "I am glad that the government has made the decision to remove face coverings in schools for pupils, based on the latest scientific advice. Wearing a mask during lessons has been one of many sacrifices children have made over the last year in our fight against the pandemic and I know they will welcome this latest step towards a return to normal school life."

Although some schools and colleges are continuing to ask students to wear face masks, on 10 May 2021, Boris Johnson announced that from 17 May students would no longer be required to do so. The Government confirmed that it hopes "this will improve interaction between teachers and students, ensuring the clearest possible communication to support learning"<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 3.4

What proportion of students are finding different aspects of school difficult to adjust to, and how has this changed from September 2020?



<sup>1</sup>Department for Education, 2021. *Face coverings no longer required in schools and colleges from 17 May.*

## KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND CAREERS LEADS

**1**

Make students' wellbeing and mental health a priority in school. Use the Wellbeing sections in the Unifrog Know-how and Resources libraries to run sessions to help students better look after their wellbeing and know where to access support if they need it.

**2**

Continue to provide 121 and small-group support to students now they've returned to school. This way they'll still feel they have the support of their teachers, which has shown to be a protective factor for motivation.

**3**

Meet with all Year 12s individually before the end of term so that they feel supported and can start to think about their next steps. Reassure them that they won't miss out on any university support as a result of the disruption of the past year.

**4**

Think about which aspects of online careers provision worked well in your school and if there are any virtual elements you wish to continue with next year to help you provide a stable careers programme.

**5**

Involve parents in their children's careers learning as much as possible. As we saw in Chapter 1, students find parents the most useful people to talk to about their next steps. When you engage parents, they're able to best support their children with up-to-date careers guidance and advice.

Please contact us if you have any questions, comments, or would like to join our growing network of partners.

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