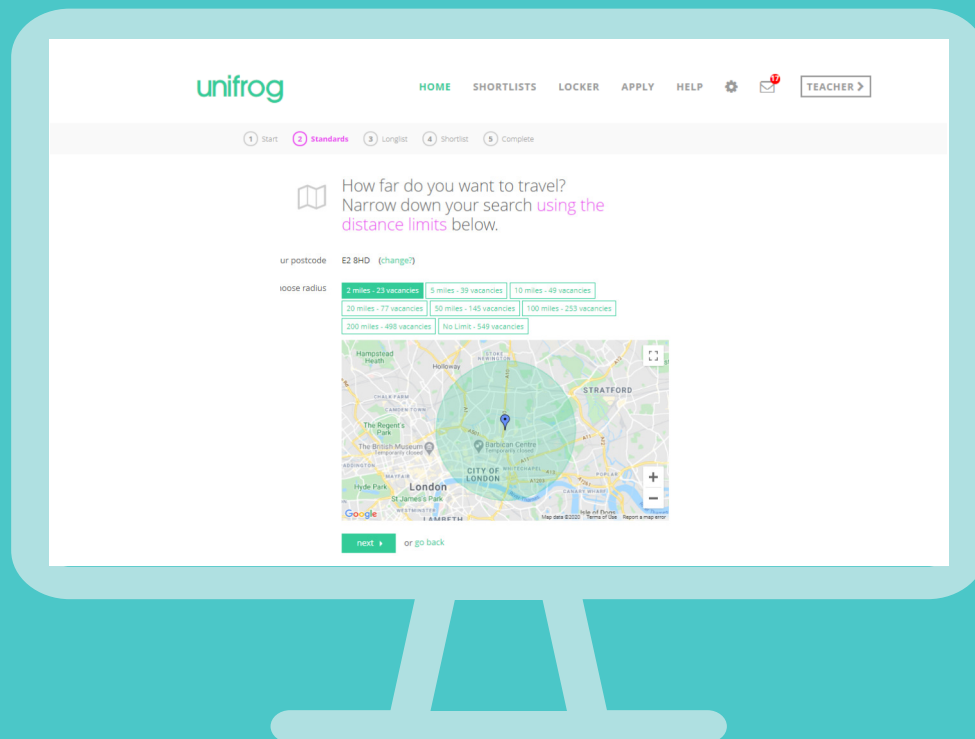


# COVID-19 impact



A report on the effect of the pandemic on  
students' wellbeing and next steps

## THE REPORT'S SIX KEY FINDINGS

1

**Students are finding the current situation challenging** and it's having a clear impact on their education, with **1 in 2 students** saying the pandemic has **negatively affected their motivation to study and do well**.

2

**Support from teachers** is key to students' wellbeing, with **80% of those with good levels of support feeling positive or optimistic** about the future, compared to just 44% of those who don't have good support.

3

Students are spending a huge amount of time on **social media**, with **30% spending over 6 hours a day online**.

4

There's been a **49% fall in the number of apprenticeship shortlists** being made on the platform, reflecting the uncertainty around apprenticeships.

5

There's been a **106% increase in the number of MOOC shortlists** created, driven by **girls and more advantaged students**.

6

The **focus on doctors and teachers** during the pandemic has led to **increased interest** in these careers.

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## FOREWORD

As I write this Foreword, schools, colleges and universities are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is uncertain when and how they will reopen. This is a time of great uncertainty for young people and their parents as they consider the next stage of their career, whether in university, college or apprenticeship.

While it cannot resolve the uncertainty, this report from Unifrog provides up-to-the-minute texture and insights into what students are feeling about their future. Based on an April and May 2020 survey of 2,500 secondary school students and analysis of 762,000 students using the Unifrog platform, it confirms some expectations and provides some cause for hope.

Not surprisingly, students are finding the current situation challenging, with 1 in 2 saying the pandemic has negatively affected their motivation to study. Looking at the number of shortlists being made by students on the Unifrog platform, we see a 41% drop in shortlists for university and 49% drop for apprenticeships. The detail around gender and socioeconomic disadvantage is particularly interesting and important.

Amid the uncertainty, there is hope. Students who get good support from teachers, stay in touch with friends and exercise regularly are more likely to report psychological wellbeing – although it is the opposite for students spending more time on social media.

There is increased interest in subjects and careers relevant to the pandemic, including medicine and teaching. The number of shortlists made for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has doubled, suggesting students see the attraction of online study at this uncertain time – though they realise the importance of their teachers' support in the online world.

Naturally, it is students in Year 13 who experience the greatest uncertainty, with 60% feeling demotivated. But Year 11 students are becoming more involved in planning ahead, with 84% feeling positive about the future. We must hold on to that, and accept that good career guidance will be more important than ever in schools and colleges in the months and years ahead.

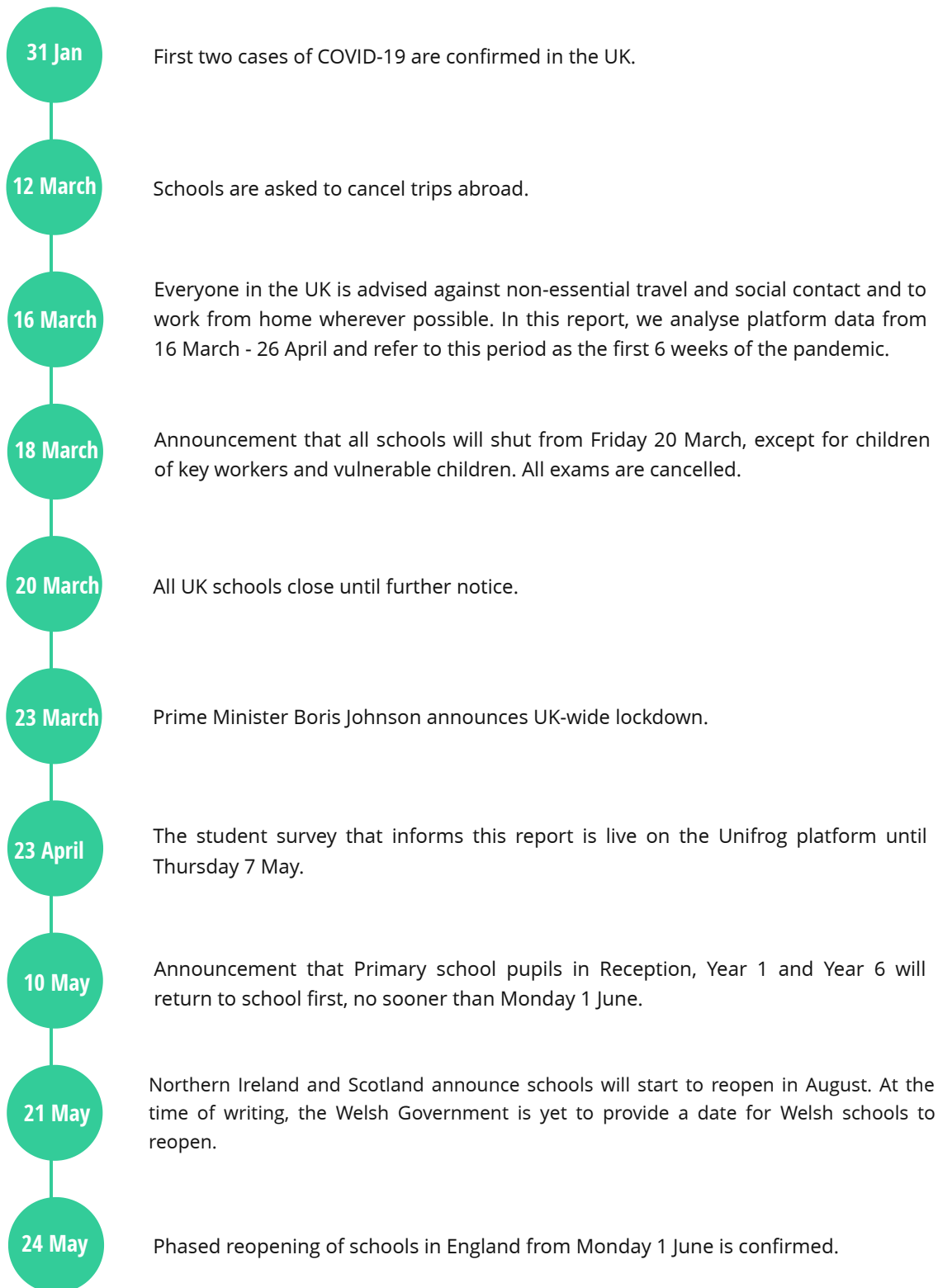


**Sir John Holman**

Emeritus Professor, University of York

Author of Good Career Guidance (the Gatsby Foundation)

## TIMELINE OF UK SCHOOL CLOSURES





## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures have led to an unprecedented period of students learning from home and it's difficult to know what the long-term impact of this will be. In this report, we look at the initial impact of the crisis on students' wellbeing and their next steps, identify the students who have been most affected, and provide tips for teachers and careers leaders supporting students.

At Unifrog, we are in a unique position to do this. As well as analysing data from the 762,000 active Year 9-13 students on the platform, we surveyed 2,500 of these students on their feelings towards the pandemic and how it was affecting their thoughts about the future. We also gained valuable insights from teachers in schools across the UK, experts in the education sector: Whitehat, UEA, Causeway Education and Gillian Keegan MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills, as well as the Psychologists at Positive Group.

We start by looking at the clear impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on students' wellbeing. They are feeling stressed and anxious, and the pandemic has negatively affected their motivation to study and do well.

We explore the three factors identified by Positive Group as protective for students' psychological wellbeing – support from teachers, keeping in touch with friends, and exercise – and the one main risk factor, time spent on social media.

In chapter two we examine how, despite logins to the platform remaining consistent, the uncertainty around university and apprenticeships seems to have contributed to a fall in the number of UK university and apprenticeship shortlists created. This has been significantly more pronounced among boys than girls, resulting in a new gender gap. Despite the majority of students surveyed saying the pandemic hadn't affected their career choices, interest in Doctors and Teachers has increased, perhaps due to their current prominence in students' lives.

In the third chapter we come to MOOCs, the standout success story of the pandemic. However, we complicate this success by looking at how the increased interest is unequally distributed among the students on the platform. With boys and under-represented students much less likely to consider taking a MOOC, it raises questions about the potential impact this may have on their future opportunities.





# 1 The impact on wellbeing

Our survey of 2,500 students found that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hugely challenging time for students. We worked with experts in Applied Psychology and Neuroscience, Positive Group, to identify the key protective

and risk factors for students' wellbeing during this time. By raising awareness of these factors, we hope to empower schools to make positive changes that will help them support their students' wellbeing during the pandemic.



CURRENT STATE OF MIND

The current situation is having a clear impact on students’ psychological wellbeing.

We asked students to score out of ten how happy they had felt over the last week. 62% scored their happiness as five or less, with girls scoring one point (out of ten) lower on average than boys.

Happiness levels also appear to decrease with age, with Years 12 and 13 reporting the lowest happiness scores.

As well as being unhappy, students are finding life in lockdown stressful, with 30% feeling stressed or anxious on at least five days out of the past week. Among those students looking after someone else, such as a vulnerable adult or younger siblings, this rose to 39%. A reminder of how important it is to be aware of the other commitments some students are balancing alongside their schoolwork.

However, it’s not all bad news. Despite the current challenges facing them, students remain upbeat. 70% of those surveyed reported feeling positive or optimistic about the future, suggesting that while they’re finding lockdown difficult, they believe things will get better.

Figure 1.1 What proportion of students feel positive or optimistic about the future?

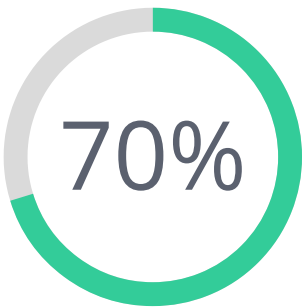


Figure 1.2 How happy have students felt (out of 10) over the last week?

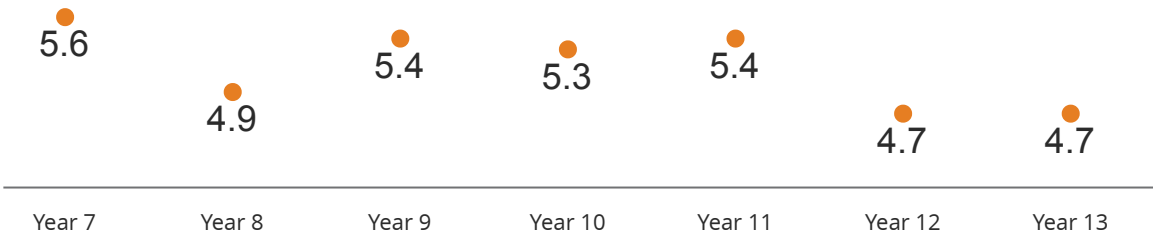
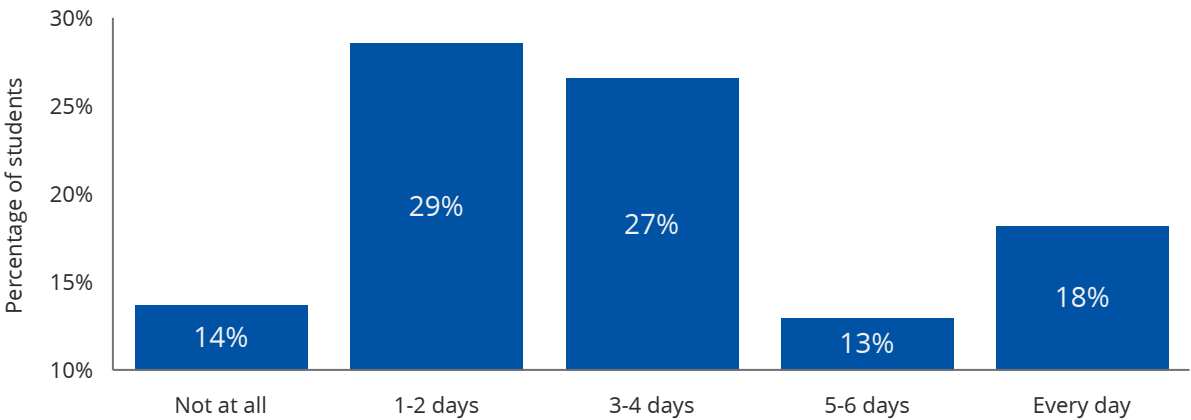


Figure 1.3 On how many days have students felt stressed or anxious over the past week?





MOTIVATION LEVELS

Students are struggling to concentrate and stay motivated whilst learning from home, especially older students.

The majority (68%) are finding it harder to concentrate at home, compared to when at school. Motivation has also taken a hit, with half of the students surveyed reporting that the pandemic has negatively affected their motivation to study and do well.

One possible reason behind this lack of motivation is the absence of exams to work towards, after it was announced on 18 March that this summer’s GCSEs and A-levels were cancelled. Almost two thirds of the Year 11 and Year 13s surveyed are expecting their calculated grades to be worse than if they’d sat exams in the summer which is likely contributing to the negative impact on students’ motivation.



Figure 1.4 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' motivation to study and do well?

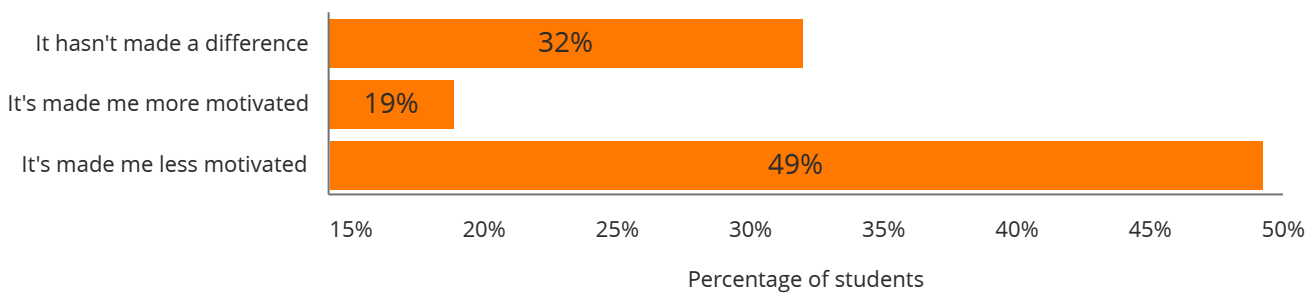
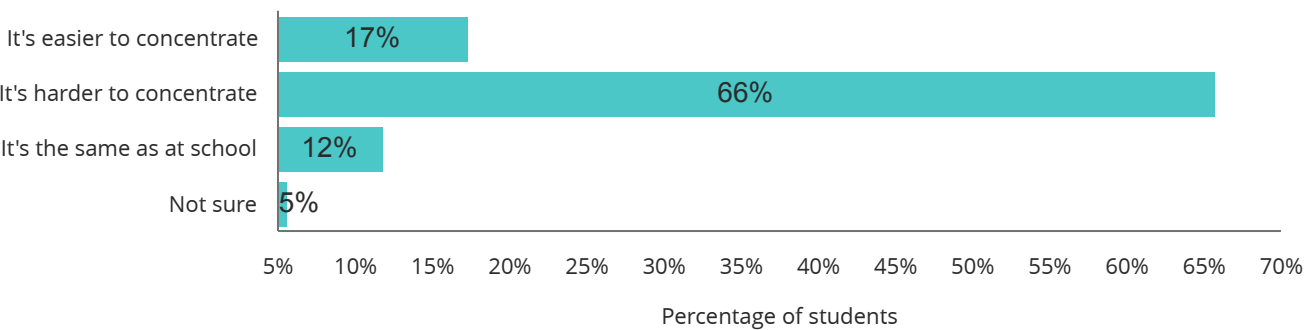


Figure 1.5 Do students find it easier or more difficult to concentrate on their schoolwork at home?



PROTECTIVE FACTORS: SUPPORT FROM TEACHERS

Positive Group identified three factors which were significantly higher among those students who reported positive psychological wellbeing. These three protective factors are support from teachers, staying in touch with friends, and exercise.

Whether students feel they're getting enough support from their teachers is important for their psychological wellbeing. Reassuringly, the majority of students surveyed (58%) feel as though they have enough support from their teachers during lockdown, although 44% say they would benefit from more time online with them to support their schoolwork.

Students who feel they have enough support from their teachers are significantly happier, scoring their happiness as 5.3 out of 10. Those who feel they don't have enough support rated their happiness as 4.1 out of 10.

Feeling as though you're getting enough support from your teachers is also related to lower levels of loneliness and significantly higher levels of optimism. 80% of those with good levels of support report feeling positive or optimistic about the future, compared to 44% of those who don't feel they have good levels of support.

Figure 1.6 How happy (out of 10) are students who feel they have enough support from their teachers, compared to those who don't?

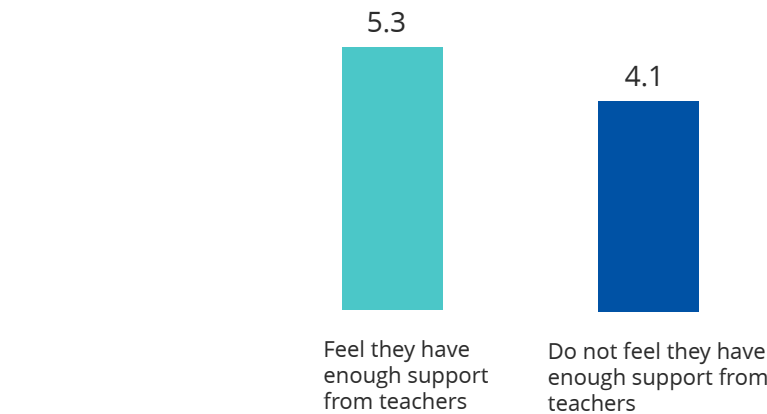
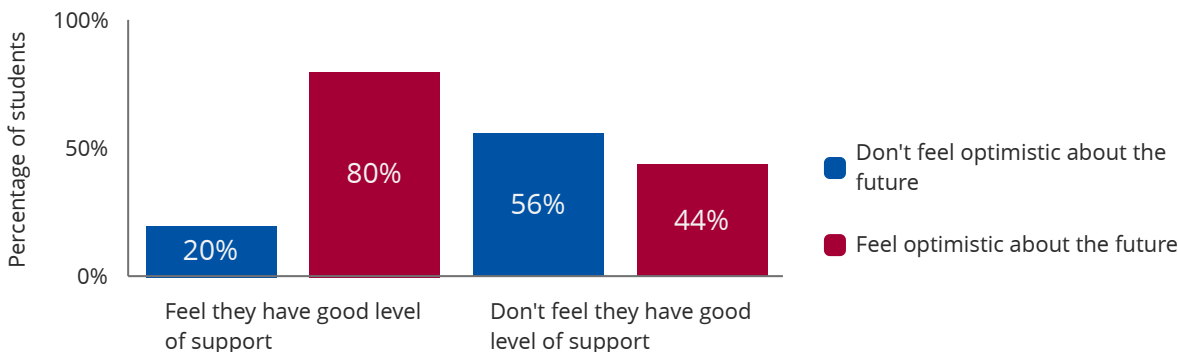


Figure 1.7 Do students who feel they have good levels of support from their teachers feel more optimistic about the future?



PROTECTIVE FACTORS: EXERCISE

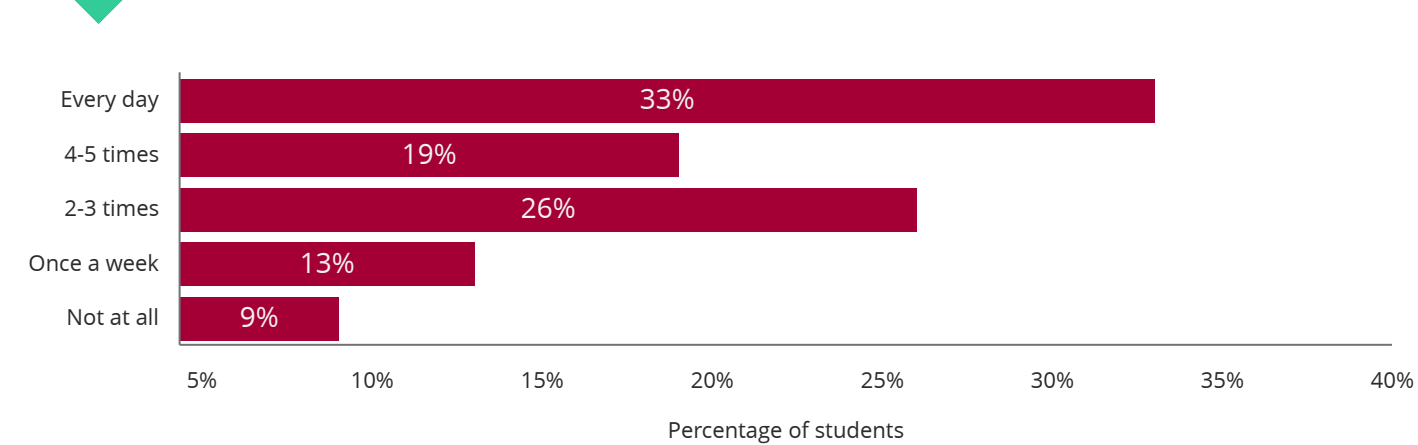
The second protective factor is exercise, with regular exercise being positively associated with both students’ psychological wellbeing and their ability to apply themselves to their schoolwork.

One in three students surveyed are doing some form of exercise every day, with only 8% doing no exercise at all.

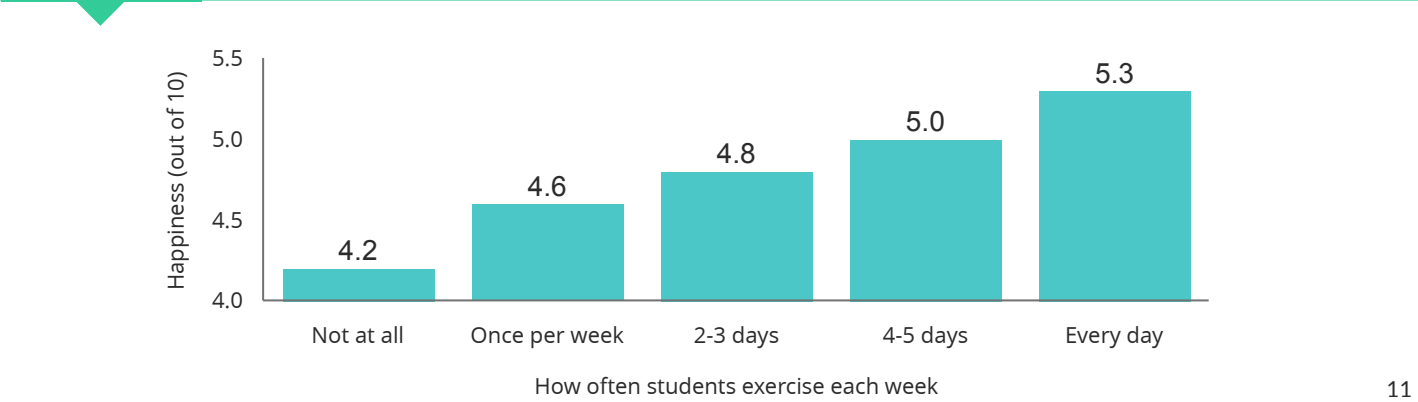
There are clear positive characteristics among those students exercising daily. They’re happier, more likely to feel positive and optimistic about the future, and their schoolwork seems to be less negatively affected. Compared to students exercising less frequently, they report finding it easier to concentrate on their schoolwork and they’re more likely to report being motivated to study and do well.



**Figure 1.8**      How often are students exercising each week?



**Figure 1.9**      How does the number of times students exercise each week affect happiness levels?



PROTECTIVE FACTORS: KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS

The third factor protective to students’ psychological wellbeing is how able they feel to stay in touch with their friends. Social media helps them to do this, but only up to a point.

Students who say they’re able to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like are happier, rating their happiness as 5.4 out of 10, compared to 4.3 for those unable to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 84% of students who report not feeling lonely are able to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like compared to only 51% of those who do report feeling lonely.

Students who spend between three and six hours a day on social media were most likely to report being able to keep in touch with friends as much as they’d like. This suggests social media does help students keep in touch with friends, but only up to a point, as students who spend more than six hours a day online did not report being able to keep in touch with friends any better. This indicates that there may be level of social media usage which has a positive effect on students’ friendships, after which point, there is no ongoing benefit.

“Social media does help students keep in touch with their friends, but only up to a point.”

Figure 1.10

What proportion of students feel able to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like?

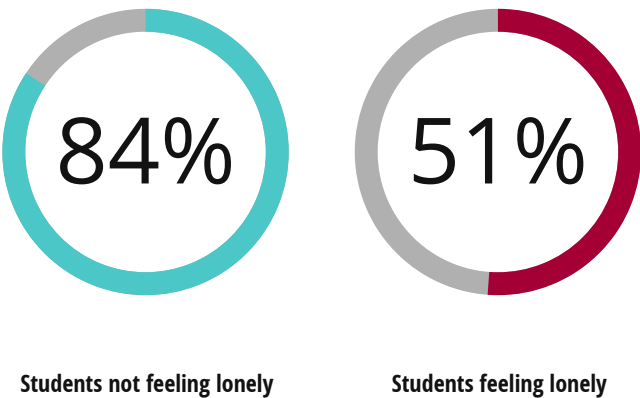
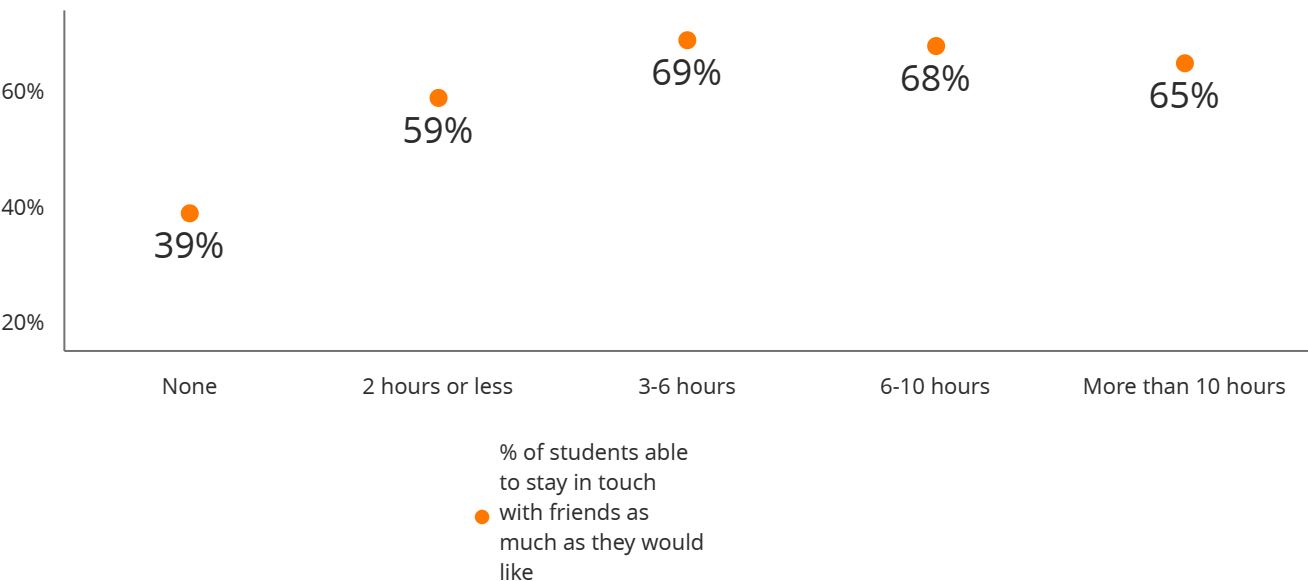


Figure 1.11

Does the amount of time students spend on social media a day have an impact on whether they report being able to stay in touch with friends as much as they would like?





RISK FACTOR: SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Positive Group found that use of social media emerged as the one key risk factor from our survey. Usage was significantly higher among those students who reported negative psychological wellbeing, including being stressed or anxious, lonely, unhappy, and less optimistic about the future.

Among the students we surveyed, social media usage increases with age. Given that negative psychological wellbeing also increases with age among those surveyed, we've controlled for age when we consider social media usage as a risk factor.

As we saw above, social media can help students to stay in touch with their friends, but when it is overused, the negatives far outweigh the positives. Some students are spending a huge amount of time on social media during lockdown.

While we saw that three to six hours a day on social media seems to helps students keep in touch with friends, a third of students surveyed are online for longer than six hours each day, with 7% online for over ten hours a day. This means that this 7% are spending well over half their waking time online on apps such as Facetime, Whatsapp, Tik-tok, Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram.

We found that a long time spent on social media each day is associated with higher levels of stress and anxiety, with 46% of students spending more than ten hours a day on social media reporting being stressed or anxious on five days or more over the past week. High social media use is also associated with lower levels of optimism and happiness, with those students not using social media at all the most happy, scoring their happiness 5.8 out of 10.

Figure 1.12 How much time are students spending on social media each day?

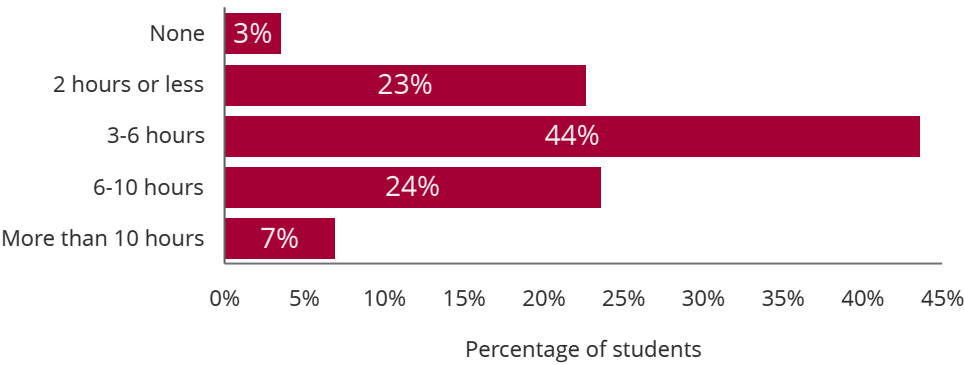
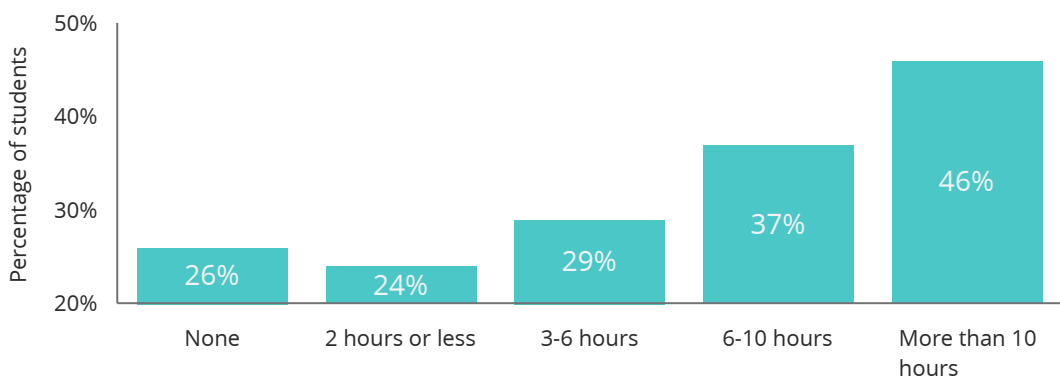


Figure 1.13 How much time are students who report being stressed or anxious on 5 days or more over the previous week spending on social media?



## EXPERT VIEW



Positive Group are a team of psychologists supporting UK schools, colleges and universities since 2016. Positive and Unifrog have been working in partnership during lockdown, helping teachers and school leaders to maintain optimal psychological health through this challenging time.

### Our analysis

The data is clear: this pandemic is adversely affecting the psychological health of a significant percentage of young people. Some will be experiencing new issues, as a result of COVID-19 and its impact on their lives. For many others, lockdown will have exacerbated issues they were already facing.

Research tells us that the majority of mental health issues emerge before early adulthood. And that if we intervene early, it's possible to change the trajectory and severity of mental health outcomes.

We must take action now to protect our young people's wellbeing.

### Our recommendations for schools

**Raise awareness and understanding of psychological health issues, to help normalise them.**

A substantial proportion of students will experience mental health issues; it's important they don't feel alone. Schools should encourage students to talk about their emotional health and seek support if they need it.

**Provide students with the knowledge and tools they need to build resilience.**

Make psychological health education a priority. Inform students of practical actions that can boost their mental health, including exercise and social support.

**Provide plenty of opportunity for students to interact with staff.**

Good relationships between teachers and students are known to be protective against anxiety and depression. Make sure all students have the opportunity to speak to their teachers as regularly as possible.

### What teachers can do

**Offer regular, face-to-face support to your students.**

When an individual's psychological health is lower, they are less likely to seek out social connection themselves. Ask yourself if any of your students have been absent or quiet recently, and make an effort to reach out to them in particular.

**Take proactive steps to maintain your own psychological health.**

You will be most effective in supporting your students' mental health if you are psychologically well yourself. Alongside other caring professions, teachers are at high risk of burn out. Any efforts to provide additional support to students must be balanced with your own wellbeing.

## KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND ADVISORS

---

1

Offer regular one-to-one support to students, wherever possible. Prioritise students who seem to be disengaged or struggling to complete schoolwork whilst at home.

2

Get students to exercise frequently, ideally everyday, by building it into the timetable or running online sessions.

3

Encourage students to limit their time on social media.

4

Make sure students feel comfortable talking about their emotional health and know where to seek support if they need it.

5

Remember to look after your own psychological health, as well as that of your students.

## 2 The impact on next steps

A key stage of a student's journey on Unifrog is the process of researching options for their next steps, and creating shortlists of opportunities they are interested in applying for.

Student's current lack of motivation to study and do well seems to be mirrored in a lack of motivation to make decisions about their next steps. We've seen a significant fall in the number of shortlists made on our university search tools and Apprenticeships tool, compared to the same time last year.

This fall is despite there being more students active on the platform, with 22% more visits to the student homepage in the first six weeks of the pandemic than in the same period last year. The way students are using the platform has changed, perhaps reflecting a lack of certainty in their decision making. Use of the Careers and Subjects libraries has increased, suggesting that students are spending more time researching broader options and pathways rather than making decisions on specific courses or opportunities.





UNIVERSITY'S NEW NORMAL

Uncertainty around what university will look like in the UK in Autumn 2020, and the impact of calculated grades, seems to have contributed to a big drop in the number of UK university shortlists made.

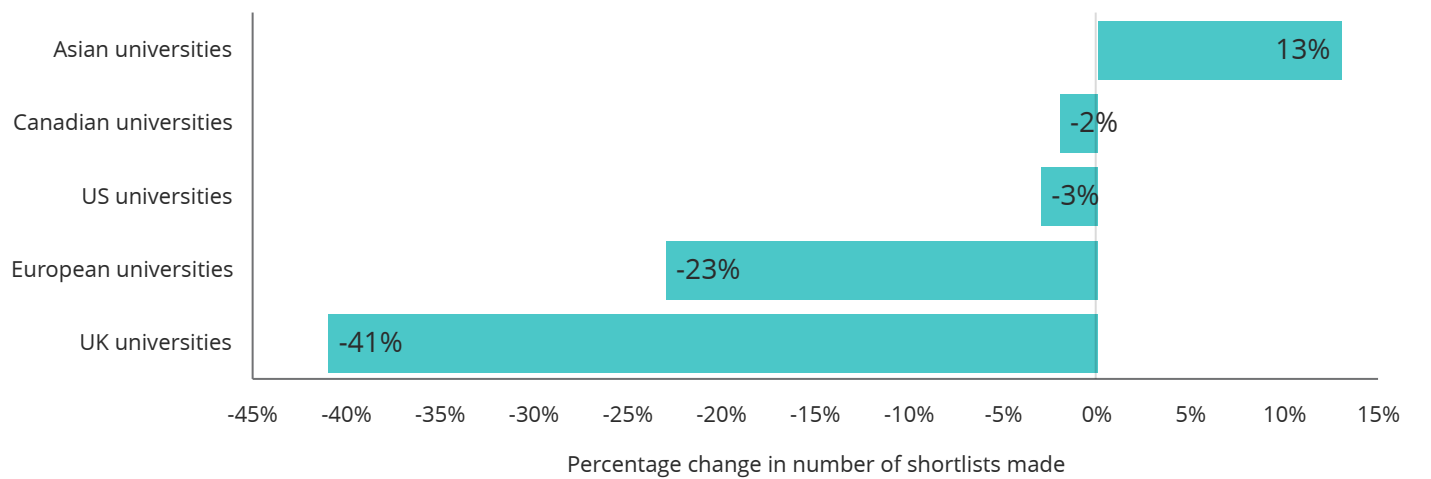
Despite remaining the most used tool on the platform, with 21,630 shortlists made in the first six weeks of the pandemic, usage is down 41% from last year. This drop is evident across all groups of students and is more significant than for universities in other areas of the world, with the number of shortlists on our Asian, European, Canadian and US university search tools falling to a much lesser degree.

With an increasing number of UK universities confirming that all lectures will be online for the 2020/21 academic year, it appears that students on the platform are waiting to see how this plays out before making decisions on the institutions they might like to apply to.



Figure 2.1

What has been the percentage change in the number of shortlists made on Unifrog's university search tools during the first 6 weeks of the pandemic compared to the same period in 2019?



## EXPERT VIEW



### Claire Petley

Head of UK/EU Recruitment & Outreach

University of East Anglia

UEA have successfully moved lots of their recruitment and outreach work online to help students with their decision making and preparation for university.

### Helping students prepare

We know the COVID-19 pandemic may have left some students uncertain about their transition to university. UEA have created a 6-week 'Preparing for University' MOOC, designed to ease any concerns by equipping students with the skills needed to get them ready for university learning. It's relevant for anyone going to university, whichever university they're planning to go to.

### Finding the right information

Choosing your first choice university is challenging under normal conditions. With the added uncertainty created by COVID-19, students may not have got an opportunity to visit campuses or attend an Applicant day.

Like lots of universities, here at UEA we've created an Applicant Hub, full of information and resources to help students with their decision making.

In the UEA Applicant Hub we've got talks from current students about life at UEA, virtual tours of the campus and city, and there are opportunities to ask current students and academics questions. There are also weekly webinars covering topics such as student finance to make sure students are getting the most up-to-date information.

### Reassuring students

Although students are facing undeniable challenges, it's still a great time to secure a place at university for the 2020/21 academic year. The UK's 18-year-old population is set to grow again in 2021, making future application cycles more competitive.



CONCERN OVER APPRENTICESHIPS

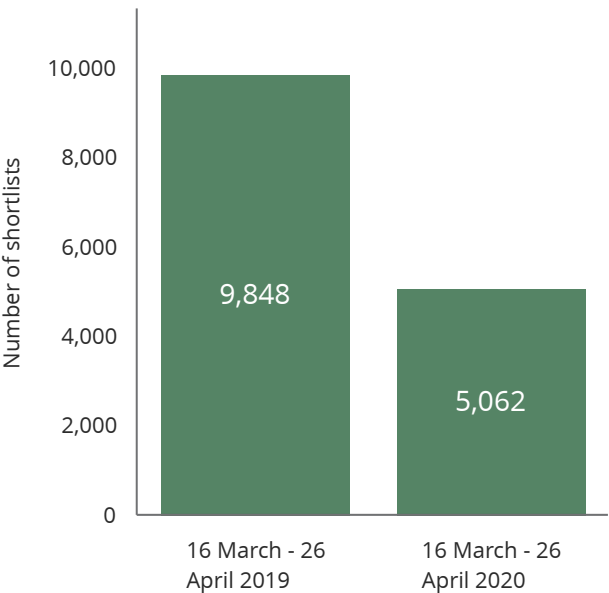
A lack of clarity around apprenticeships and the impact of lockdown on businesses around the UK are factors that have likely contributed to the sharp decline in the number of apprenticeship shortlists created on the Unifrog platform.

The Apprenticeships tool has seen the biggest drop in usage on the platform, with 49% fewer shortlists made than in the same period last year. Of the 304 apprenticeship providers who responded to an FE Week request for data, only 20% of the 13,732 apprenticeship starts planned for April were achieved. 137 of these providers had been unable to start a single apprentice<sup>1</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have made students hesitant about apprenticeships. This threatens to undo the progress made over the past few years in increasing the number of apprenticeships available and improving the perception of them.

Figure 2.2

How many shortlists were made on Unifrog's Apprenticeships search tool in 2019 and 2020?



EXPERT VIEW

Gillian Keegan  
MP



Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills  
Department for Education

"As a former apprentice myself, I know how powerful apprenticeships can be at benefitting people of all ages and backgrounds. I know that for me, an apprenticeship opened a new world of work and learning and helped build my confidence - I wouldn't be where I am today without that experience.

"This is the time of year when young people leaving school will be considering their options, and setting off on a career path can sometimes be overwhelming. Whether someone thrives in an academic environment or not, apprenticeships should not be overlooked. I know from my own experience that apprenticeships can give you the

best of both worlds; you can work towards a degree or other qualifications. At the same time, you'll gain experience in a real workplace and develop other important skills to help you succeed in the world of work.

There are over 530 high-quality, industry designed apprenticeship standards. From digital marketing and teaching, to dental healthcare and aerospace engineering, there's an apprenticeship for everyone – and the number available is constantly on the rise.

Making decisions about your next steps after school is daunting at the best of times, and I realise that must only be made more difficult given the uncertainty of Covid-19. We have introduced flexibilities to ensure apprentices can continue to carry on with their learning as far as possible, including encouraging remote delivery of training and allowing changes to end point assessment.

Apprenticeships continue to play an important role in creating employment opportunities whilst providing opportunities for people to earn whilst they learn and gain the skills employers want and need."

<sup>1</sup>Linford, Nick (2020). 'Revealed: Covid-19 hit to apprenticeship starts'. FE Week.

## EXPERT VIEW



WhiteHat is a tech startup democratising access to the best careers by matching non-graduate talent with apprenticeship opportunities at some of the UK's most exciting companies.

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the landscape of education and employment, presenting both challenges and opportunities for students interested in apprenticeships. Here's some information for teachers advising students about apprenticeships during the pandemic:

### Opportunities are still out there

Despite a decline in the number of apprenticeship placements on offer and a number of employers pushing back their start dates until September, students shouldn't give up on apprenticeships. Other employers have embraced remote working and continue to on-board apprentices, even during lockdown. At WhiteHat we continue to source and place apprentices at blue-chip companies like Morgan Stanley, Facebook and Unilever.

### Remote support

All our apprentices have a one-on-one coach to help support them through their placement. The coach team was an early adopter of remote delivery so have been able to mentor and coach their apprentices, making sure they don't miss out on any of this support.

### The social side of apprenticeships

With a number of universities confirming that they're shifting to remote learning for the 2020/21 academic year and fees remaining unchanged, many students are facing the prospect of at least a year of their degree not including the traditional 'university experience'.

While apprenticeships don't share the campus dynamic, at WhiteHat we've put the apprentice community at the heart of our offering. During lockdown, the community offering has expanded greatly to include mindfulness sessions, tech bootcamps, weekly yoga, games nights and an inspirational speaker series.

### The future looks bright

While it is impossible to judge the long term impact of the crisis, early indications are that many of the industries bouncing back are also those most suitable for apprenticeships, such as software engineering, data analysis and digital marketing.



## MORE TEACHERS AND DOCTORS ON THE HORIZON

While 67% of the students we surveyed said that the COVID-19 pandemic hadn't made them rethink what subjects or careers they were interested in, we've seen a subtle shift on the platform towards roles that have been prominent during the pandemic.

Our Careers library has changed in the last year so we compared the most popular careers in the first six weeks of the pandemic with the preceding six weeks. While Forensic Psychologist and Solicitor were the top two most favoured careers both before and during the pandemic, Secondary School Teacher and Hospital Doctor have seen the biggest rises in popularity, moving up 10 and 11 places respectively.

This is backed up by the survey results, with 70% of the students surveyed saying they now have more respect for doctors, nurses, and other people who work in the NHS. 38% of students reported increased respect for their teachers. It's possible this increase in support is encouraging students to consider careers that have been most visible during the pandemic, even if they hadn't been of interest before.

Figure 2.3

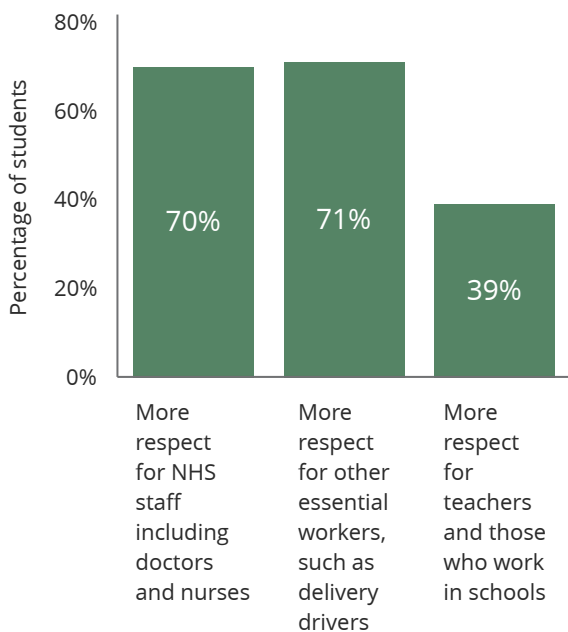
What are the top 10 career profiles shortlisted on Unifrog's Careers library in the first 6 weeks of the pandemic?

Ranking	Career profile	Number of shortlists
1	Forensic Psychologist	566
2	Solicitor	510
3	Psychologist	483
4	Barrister	442
5	Secondary School Teacher	373
6	Interior Designer	365
7	Private Investigator	347
8	Hospital Doctor	345
9	Surgeon	336
10	Police Detective	331



Figure 2.4

Do students have more respect for keyworkers since the COVID-19 pandemic?



## EXPERT VIEW



### Natasha Roberts

Assistant Head of College

Melton Vale Sixth Form College

Melton Vale Sixth Form College has been successfully running its CEIAG programme remotely while it has been closed.



## Make the most of technology

We started using Microsoft Teams for careers and subject lessons two years ago to encourage independent learning. This meant it was relatively easy for us to switch to fully remote lessons when the college closed. One of the positives to emerge from this period is that our students are becoming incredibly digitally savvy which will help them in future applications.

## Stick to the usual timetable

We've been sticking to the normal college day and have been encouraging parents to get their households to do the same. We've seen that students with structured days seem to be coping better. Students 'like' a post on Teams which acts like a register so we're able to follow up with any students who aren't engaging. Working digitally all day is exhausting and students definitely need more downtime than usual so we really encourage them to stop working at 4pm.

## CEIAG provision

We have separate channels on Teams for the different post-18 pathways and I post information about virtual open days, MOOCs, and wider reading suggestions. We're following the same process and timetable as normal with our Unifrog lessons and I think it's reassuring for students to know that it's business as usual and they still need to be thinking about their futures!

## Be honest with students

We've been really honest with our students from the start about how challenging remote working can be, both for students and teachers. Teachers have been sharing their typical day working from home to show students that we're all in this together.

THE NEW GENDER GAP

During this period of school closures, we've seen the gap between girls and boys' engagement with the platform widen. In normal times, even after controlling for the fact that we have more girls on the platform than boys, girls are more active, creating a higher number of shortlists than boys.

Since the start of the pandemic, the number of shortlists created by boys, across all tools, has fallen to a much greater degree than it has for girls. It's important teachers try to address this gap to avoid an imbalance in how prepared girls and boys are for their next steps. If left unchecked, this could lead to a widening of the gap that already exists in the number of girls and boys actually applying to university. In 2019, despite the gap narrowing for the first time since 2013, girls were 1.36 times more likely to enter HE than boys<sup>1</sup>.

THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT FOR YEAR 11

The pandemic seems to have encouraged students to start researching their next steps at an earlier age. We've seen a marked increase in the number of shortlists made by students in Year 11, across all tools on the platform, bucking the trend of reduced usage for the older year groups.

With the shift to online learning, the Unifrog platform is frequently being introduced to students at an earlier stage. Having more time to research subjects and careers that may interest them and to build up their activities and competencies profiles, means the current Year 11s should be well prepared for their next steps. The survey also found that Year 11s seem less negatively affected by the pandemic than older students. Their motivation to study and do well hasn't been impacted to the same extent and 84% feel positive or optimistic about the future, compared to just 60% of Year 13s.

Figure 2.5

What is the percentage change in the number of shortlists made in the first 6 weeks of the pandemic compared to in 2019?

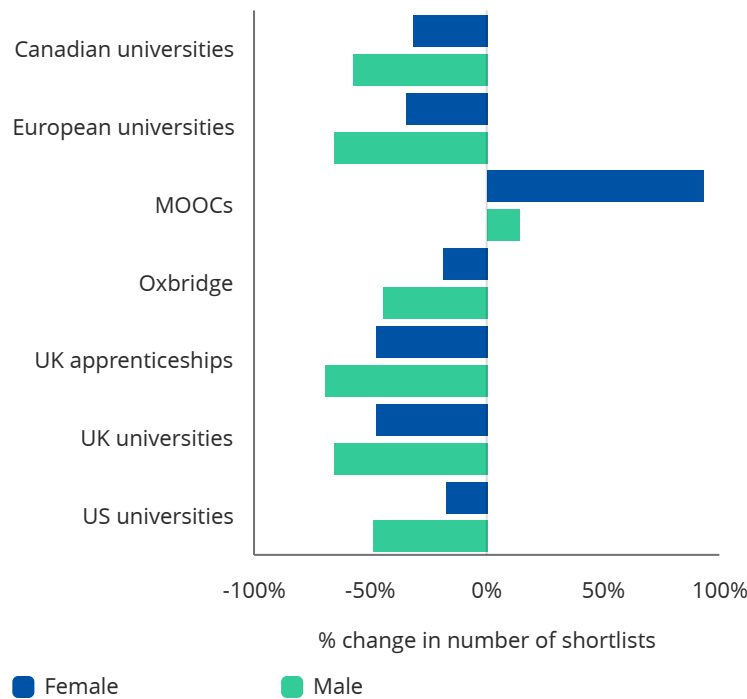
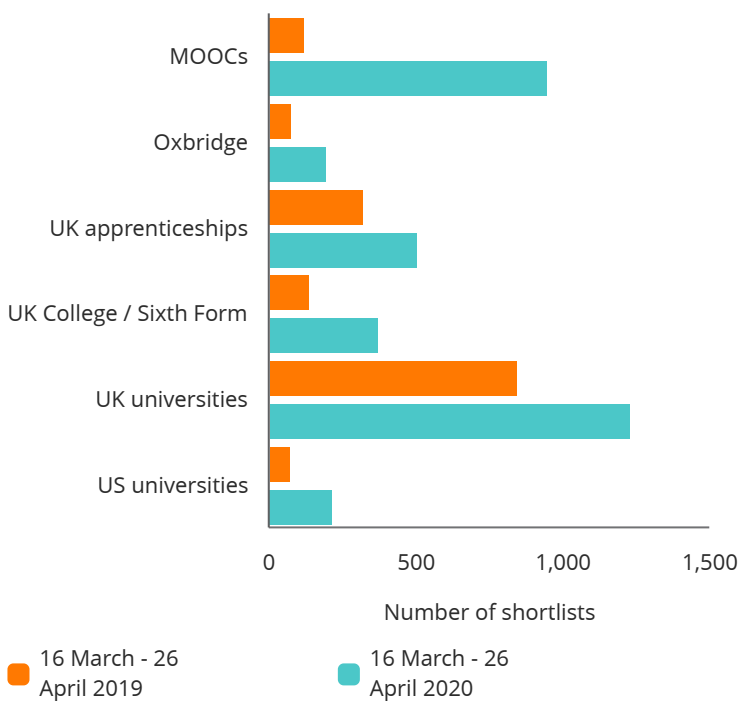


Figure 2.6

How many shortlists have Year 11s made on each tool since the start of the pandemic, compared to the same period last year?



<sup>1</sup>UCAS End of Cycle Report. Chapter 6

## KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND ADVISORS

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### 1

Have students use this time to research a broader range of options and pathways that they may not have considered before the pandemic.

### 2

Stick to the normal CEIAG timetable where possible and talk to students about their futures to make sure they remain focused on their next steps, and what they need to do to get there.

### 3

Encourage students in Year 13 to make the most of universities' online resources such as virtual open days, MOOCs and webinars to help with their decision making.

### 4

Embrace technology so that students are able to demonstrate their digital literacy in future Personal Statements and CVs.

### 5

Be honest with students about how challenging working from home can be, both for students and teachers.



# 3 MOOCs

## THE COVID-19 SUCCESS STORY

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are short courses, taken entirely online, that are open to anyone and usually at least partly free. Many of the world's leading universities offer MOOCs. They have been around since

2008 but their popularity has soared during lockdown. This enthusiasm for MOOCs hasn't been shared equally however, with some groups of students significantly more likely to take a MOOC than others.



THE RISE OF MOOCs

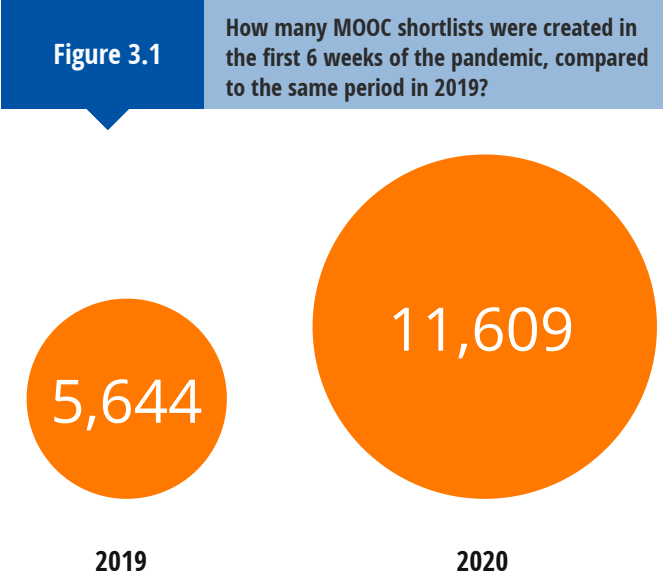
On the Unifrog platform we’ve seen a 106% increase in the number of shortlists made on the MOOCs search tool, with almost 6,000 more shortlists created in the first six weeks of the pandemic than in the same period last year.

This was backed up by the survey, with more than a third of students either having already completed a MOOC in the last month or considering starting one. The main reason students gave for taking a MOOC was to increase their chance of gaining a place at college, university or on an apprenticeship. This suggests that while the usual routes for students to demonstrate their interest in a specific field, such as work experience or extracurricular activities, are not an option, they’re using MOOCs as an alternative.

WHERE YOU COME FROM

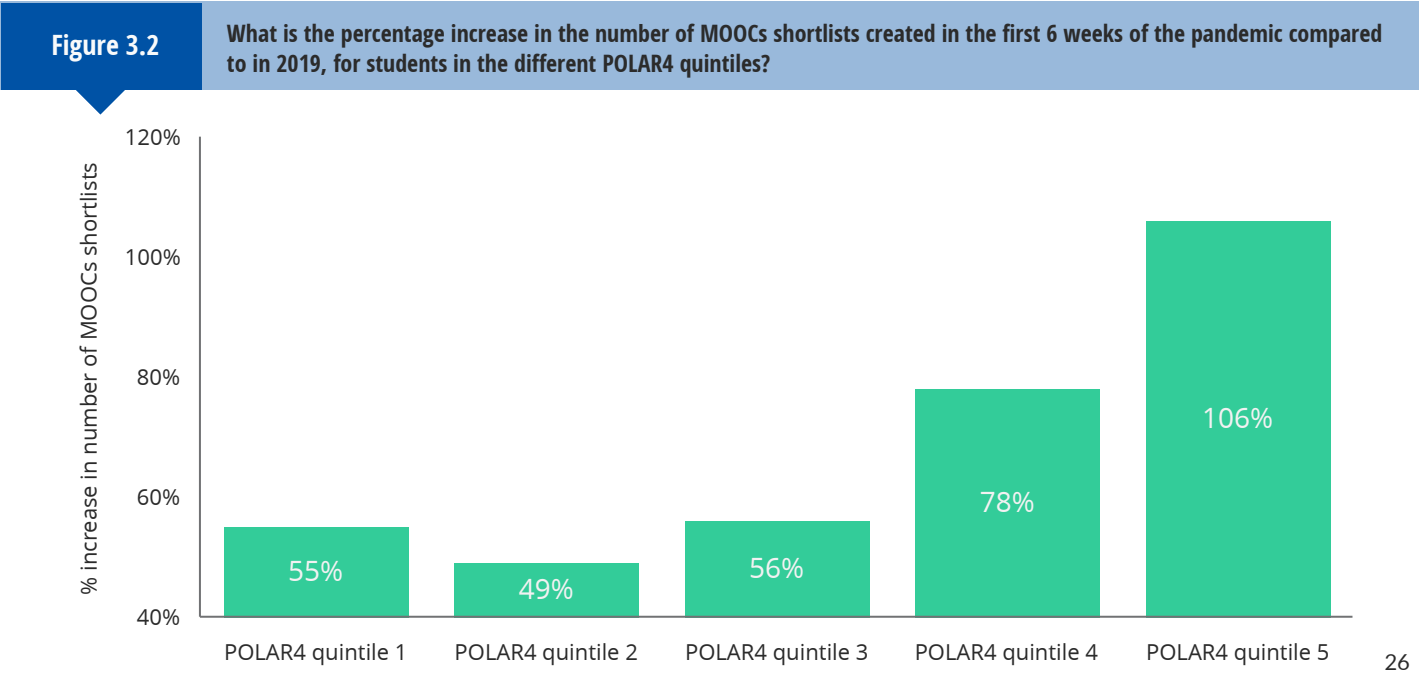
We know that where you live has a big impact on whether you go to university. On the platform we’ve seen that students who live in more advantaged areas of the UK are much more likely to take a MOOC during lockdown than students who live in less advantaged areas.

Students from POLAR4 quintile 5 (those living in areas with the highest levels of participation in higher education) are 106% more likely to create a MOOCs shortlist compared to in the same period last year.

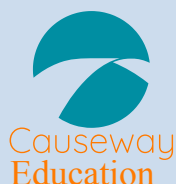


For POLAR4 quintile 1 students (those living in areas with the lowest levels of participation in higher education), the increase was much lower, at 55%.

If, as those students surveyed believe, MOOCs will help them to gain a place at university or on an apprenticeship, it’s important that these already less advantaged students don’t get left behind.



## EXPERT VIEW



At Causeway we draw on research to find more effective ways to help under-represented groups access university and use it to inform best practice for teachers and advisors.

### Our recommendations for teachers

#### **Don't direct all students to the same resources**

Pointing all students towards the same resources will not close the widening gap between those who will and won't access university.

Better-off students are accessing MOOCs more, probably because they understand the benefit of wider reading from their well-connected networks at home. At Causeway we have found that comments like "do some independent research" only resonate when a student understands what that actually looks like in practice and how it applies to them.

#### **Disadvantaged students need targeted guidance**

Provide students with targeted and focused support. This will involve finding out which courses they are interested in, directing them to the right resource, and then chasing them up.

#### **Focus your efforts**

Year 13s will need specific support. Many more UCAS offer-holders are 'undecided' this year, and disadvantaged students even more so. Students need clear guidance on what to do about their final options ahead of August. Nearly all universities have virtual teams dedicated to answering offer-holders' questions. Students who were hoping to apply for apprenticeships or degree apprenticeships will find a much smaller selection so they will need support to consider their options.

Year 12s will be missing the most important preparation period for making post-18 decisions. It's crucial that students are still supported this term and still access the online equivalents of summer outreach programmes.

#### **More information can mean more confusion**

Posting general tips and information to everybody can add to the confusion and anxiety for disadvantaged students. Targeting students for conversations and then helping them navigate the sea of information available is a much more effective approach.

## ANOTHER GENDER GAP

Earlier we looked at the gap between girls' and boys' engagement with the platform in the first six weeks of the pandemic. Nowhere is this gap more visible than on the MOOCs search tool, with the number of shortlists created by girls increasing by 93% since last year, compared to just 14% for boys. As with less advantaged students, it's important that teachers encourage boys to think about the benefits of taking a MOOC to make sure they're not disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

This difference between the genders continues when we look at the subjects that are most shortlisted on the MOOCs tool - only two MOOCs appear in both the top 10 for boys and for girls. The most popular MOOCs for girls are those on Psychology and Biology, whereas boys prefer Economics and Finance. This echoes the trends we see in the subjects and careers that girls and boys favourite in the Subjects and Careers libraries.

**Figure 3.3**

What are the top 10 most popular MOOCs for boys and girls in the first 6 weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Top 10 most popular MOOCs for girls**

Ranking	MOOC title
1	The Psychology of Criminal Justice
2	Forensic Psychology: Witness Investigation
3	Human Rights and International Criminal Law: An Introduction
4	Introduction to Clinical Psychology
5	International Women's Health and Human Rights
6	Introduction to International Criminal Law
7	Animal Behaviour and Welfare
8	Molecular Biology - Part 1: DNA Replication and Repair
9	Introduction to Psychology: The Psychology of Personality
10	Introduction to Animal Behaviour

**Top 10 most popular MOOCs for boys**

Ranking	MOOC title
1	Financial Accounting
2	Introduction to Computer Science and Programming Using Python
3	Bonds & Stocks
4	Quantum Mechanics
5	Microeconomics
6	Particle Physics: an Introduction
7	Molecular Biology - Part 1: DNA Replication and Repair
8	Poverty to Prosperity: Understanding Economic Development
9	Differential Equations: Fourier Series and Partial Differential Equations
10	Exploring Everyday Chemistry



## EXPERT VIEW



### Martin Allenby

Assistant Headteacher

The Duchess's Community High School, Alnwick

The school has used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reinvent their guidance and are starting to use MOOCs as part of both their transition and curriculum work.

## Recommendations for teachers

### Encourage independence

The main reason we're getting students to take MOOCs is to improve their independence. This is always one of the main challenges when teaching young people and we believe MOOCs could be a really powerful tool to get students to learn more independently.

### Transition work

As well as embedding MOOCs within our subject curriculums to enhance provision, we're hoping to start using MOOCs as a key part of our transition work. We'll be getting students in Years 11 and 12 to choose a MOOC to take over the summer to get them ready for the start of the next academic year. For students in Year 13, we're encouraging them to select a MOOC to help prepare them for university by honing their independent study skills.

### Direct students to specific MOOCs

There's so many MOOCs out there that students need to be directed to specific MOOCs. Although this requires a bit of time from teachers, it's important to make sure that students are selecting courses that are relevant to them, and that are at the right level.

### Students don't need to pay for the certificate

It's not necessary for students to pay for a certificate to say they've completed a MOOC, it's enough to just talk about it in their Personal Statement and say what they learned from the experience.



## KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND ADVISORS

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### 1

Make sure all students and staff are aware of MOOCs, and how taking one can help with future university, college, apprenticeship or job applications.

### 2

In particular, encourage boys and under-represented groups to consider taking a MOOC to prevent them being left at a disadvantage.

### 3

Under-represented students need targeted and focused support when thinking about MOOCs, it's not enough to say "do some independent research". Direct them to the right resources and then follow up with them.

### 4

Set MOOCs as transition work over the summer to help students prepare for the start of the next academic year.

### 5

Encourage students in Year 13 to use this time to prepare for the independent learning required at university by taking a MOOC.

