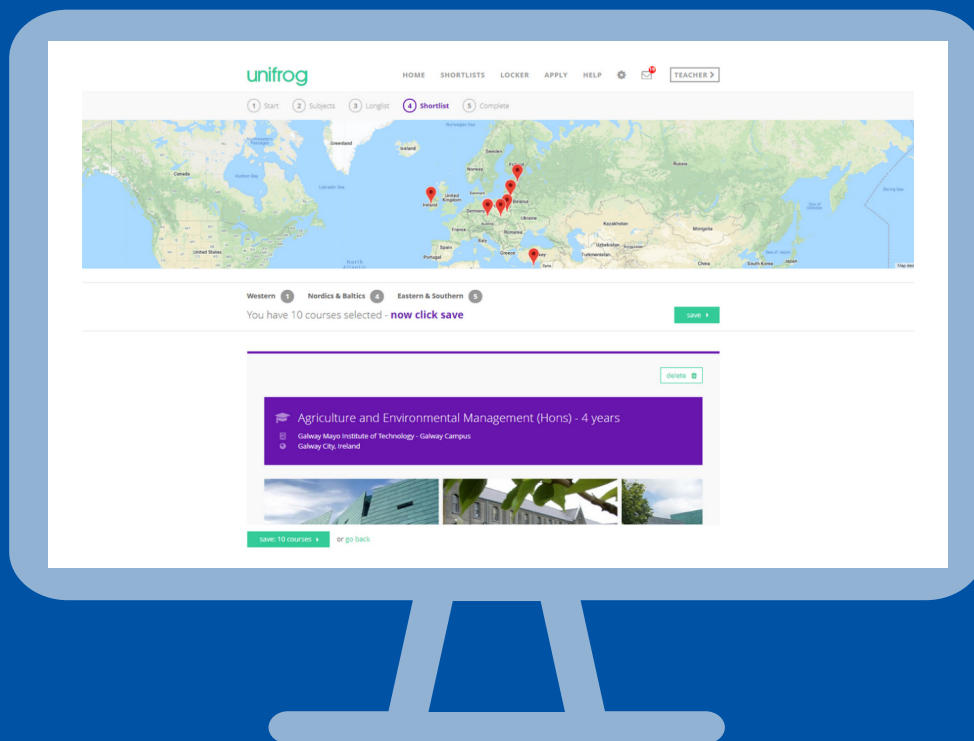


International student choices



A report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' decision making and psychological wellbeing

THE REPORT'S SIX KEY FINDINGS

1

Students are finding life during the pandemic stressful, with **27% feeling stressed or anxious** on at least five days out of the past week.

2

1 in 2 students say the pandemic has made them **less motivated to study and do well**.

3

Students are finding **decision making challenging**; 23% believe the pandemic has made making decisions more difficult and **50% that the lack of in-person university visits will have an impact**.

4

Students who feel they have **good support** from their teachers and counselors are **significantly happier** than those who don't.

5

Despite the number of university shortlists increasing across all other tools, the **pandemic coupled with continued uncertainty around Brexit** has led to a **16% drop in the number of UK university shortlists made**.

6

There's been a **172% increase in shortlists made on the MOOCs search tool**, mainly driven by girls.

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FOREWORD

As we are all very much aware, this has been the most extraordinary time for everyone across the globe and education has not escaped the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unifrog has produced a detailed report looking specifically at the impact of COVID-19 on international students and their future plans. The report offers an insight that international school leaders will find very informative and useful in their own support planning for students and their futures.

Schools have had to massively adapt the provision they offer, moving swiftly away from the day to day interaction of a vibrant school to dealing with all of the students' academic, pastoral and guidance needs through an online approach.

This Unifrog report identifies that this online approach is a challenge to schools and students and has led to a number of students becoming less motivated to do well. The pandemic, coupled with Brexit, has resulted in a 16% drop in the number of shortlists made on the UK universities search tool. With an uncertain global future, students have reflected and possibly felt equally uncertain.

Like all of us, students are finding decision making about their future a challenge. 23% have said decision making is more difficult as a result of the pandemic and 32% are delaying making decisions until they have a clearer picture of where the pandemic is taking us.

However, not everything is negative. MOOCs are more popular with a 172% increase in the number of MOOCs shortlists being made, the biggest increase being from female students. It is also very clear that where students have good support from school, teachers and counselors they are much happier than those without such strong support networks.

The report offers many other information points that will help schools to support their students and I believe it is well worth investing some time in accessing it to develop your understanding of the impact of the pandemic on your students.



Mark Leppard MBE

Headmaster, The British School Al Khubairat

Chair, British Schools in the Middle East (BSME)

INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented period of students learning from home across the world 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 international students' decision making and wellbeing and provide actions for teachers and counselors supporting students during this uncertain time.

At Unifrog, we are in a unique position to do this. As well as analysing data from the 57,000 active international students on the platform, we surveyed 320 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 counselors in international schools across the world, experts in the education sector: The Open University, David Hawkins, The University of East Anglia, The University of British Columbia and Indiana University, 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 and counselors, keeping in touch with friends, and exercise – and the one main risk factor, time spent on social media.

In chapter two we examine how, while the pandemic has negatively impacted students' ability to make decisions, their use of the Unifrog platform to research opportunities has increased. There's been an increase in the number of shortlists made on all our university search tools, except for the UK tool. This seems to be a combination of the pandemic and the ongoing uncertainty surrounding Brexit. We also look at the most popular destinations for students in different regions.

In the third chapter we come to MOOCs, the standout success story of the pandemic. However, with boys significantly less likely to take a MOOC than girls, it raises questions about the potential impact this may have on their future opportunities.



1 The impact on wellbeing

Our survey of 320 international 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 associated with 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 international students’ psychological wellbeing.

We asked students to score how happy out of ten they had felt over the last week. 59% scored their happiness as five or less. As well as being unhappy, students are finding life during the pandemic stressful, with 27% feeling stressed or anxious on at least five days out of the past week.

Stress and anxiety is closely related to worry and so it is important that counselors do all they can to help students manage their worries during this time. We asked students to rate how worried they were about different aspects of their education. Students were most worried about teachers deciding their exams results, followed by worrying that their learning will be left behind.

However, it’s not all bad news. Despite the current challenges facing them, students remain upbeat. 86% of those surveyed reported feeling positive or optimistic about the future, suggesting that while they’re finding life during the pandemic difficult, they believe things will get better.

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

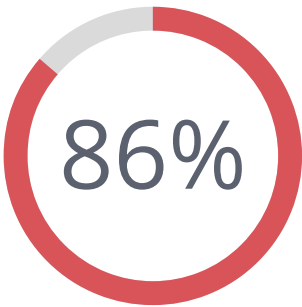


Figure 1.2 How happy have students felt (out of 10) over the last week?

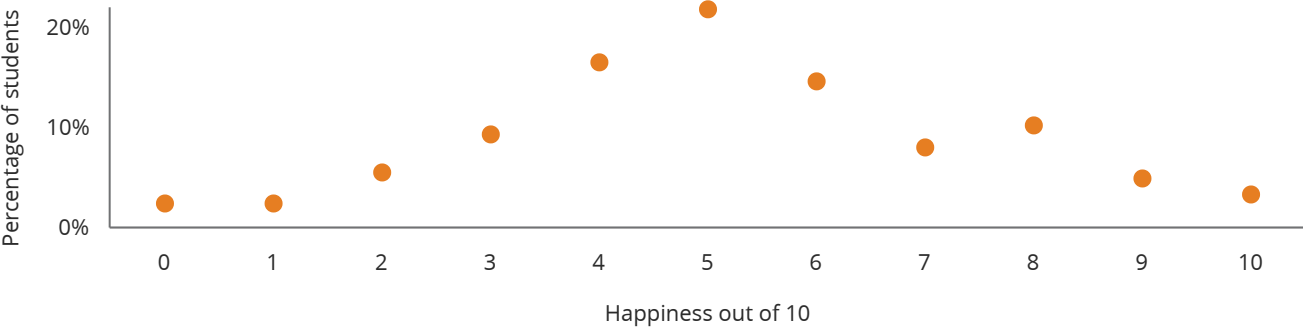
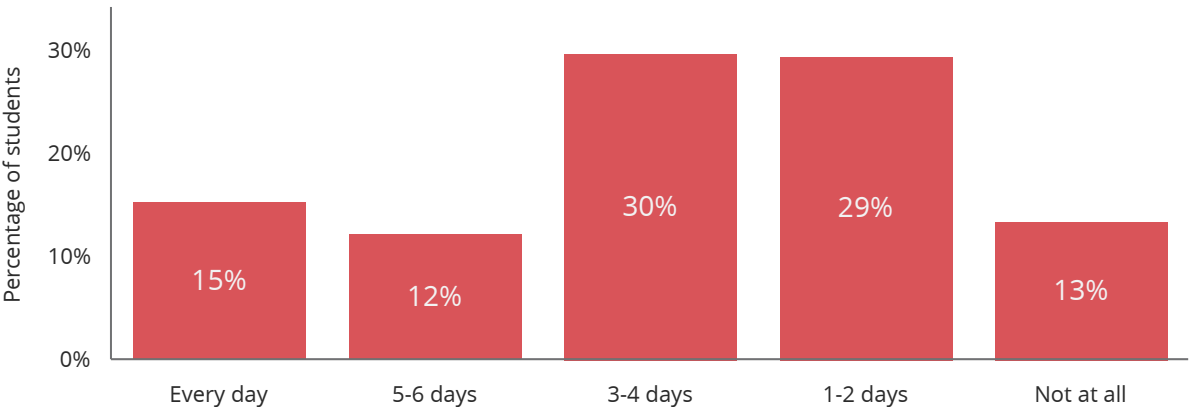


Figure 1.3 On how many days have students felt stressed or anxious over the past week?



MOTIVATION LEVELS

Students are struggling to concentrate and stay motivated whilst learning from home.

The majority (61%) 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 with the IB following suit on 23 March. With 44% of students concerned about teachers deciding their exam results, it’s likely this is contributing to the negative impact on students’ motivation.



Figure 1.4

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

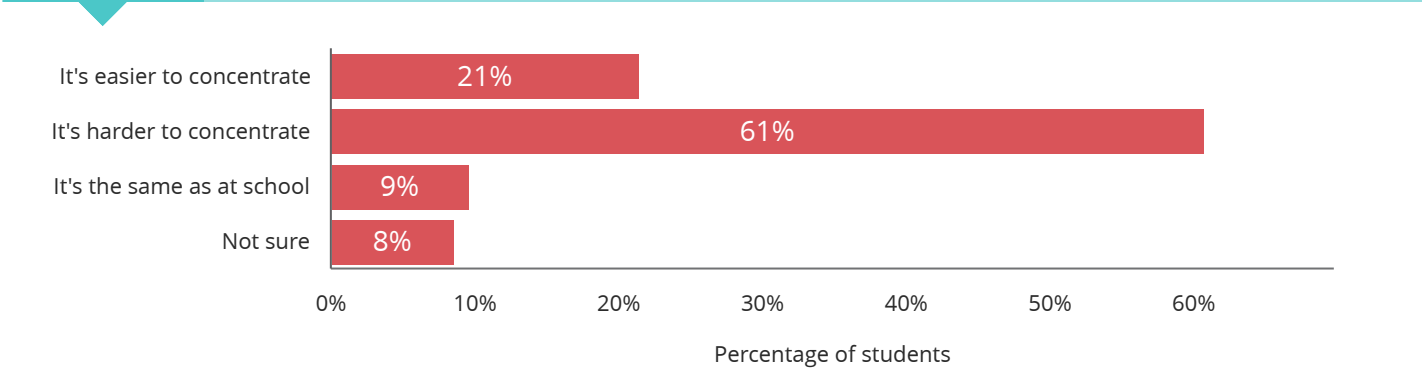
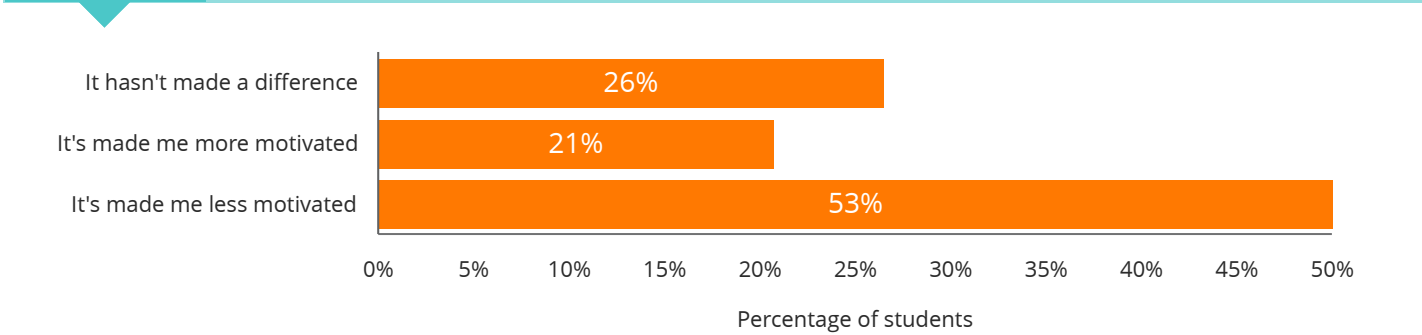


Figure 1.5

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



PROTECTIVE FACTORS: SUPPORT FROM TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

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 and counselors is an important protective factor for their psychological wellbeing. Reassuringly, the majority of students surveyed (85%) feel as though they have good levels of support from their teachers and counselors during lockdown, although 55% say they would benefit from more time online with them to support their schoolwork.

Students who feel as though they have good levels of support from their teachers and counselors are significantly happier, scoring their happiness as 5.6 out of 10, than those who feel they don't have good levels of support, who rated their happiness as 4.6 out of 10.

Feeling as though you're getting good levels of support is also related to lower levels of loneliness. 90% of students who reported not feeling lonely feel they have good levels of support from their teachers and counselors, whereas only 78% of those students who reported feeling lonely feel they have good levels of support.

Figure 1.6

How happy (out of 10) are students who feel they have a good level of support from their teachers and counselors, compared to those who don't?

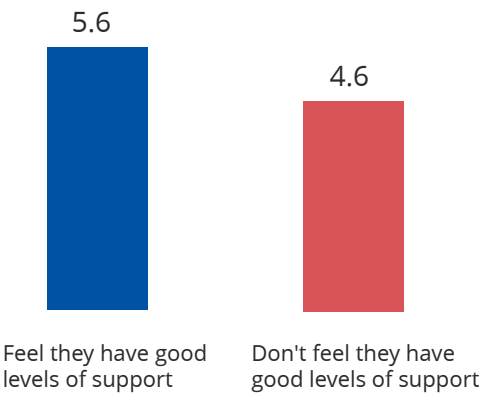
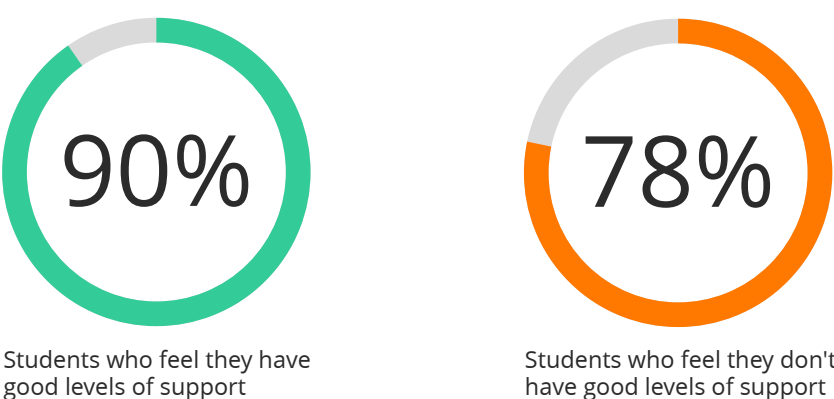


Figure 1.7

What proportion of students who feel they have good levels of support from their teachers report not feeling lonely, compared to those that feel they don't have good levels of support?



EXPERT VIEW



MARLBOROUGH COLLEGE MALAYSIA

Judith Paulin

Head of University and Career Guidance

Marlborough College Malaysia

Marlborough College Malaysia have been supporting their students and continuing to provide outstanding university and career guidance throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Providing support

Making decisions about university is always difficult, but this year there's even more things for students to consider. We're providing lots of support for students over email and Google Meets to offer them guidance and to help them make the decision that's right for them. It's also a strange time for our 2020 cohort who will be leaving school without the normal closure that comes with having a leaving ball and graduation prize giving ceremony. Although some virtual options are being put in place, they may need extra support to manage that change.

Destinations

We've seen a shift with more students thinking about staying in Malaysia for university as it's looking like it may be an easier option with border controls due to the pandemic. There's also been a slight reorientation with some students considering Australia for the first time, anecdotally for some as a result of its perceived successful handling of the pandemic.

Aspirational behaviour

There's been an increase in students applying to aspirational universities such as Oxbridge or Ivy League universities who may not have done so before the pandemic. The feeling is that, in the current climate, stretching financially for these prestigious universities is more worth it.

Delayed decision making

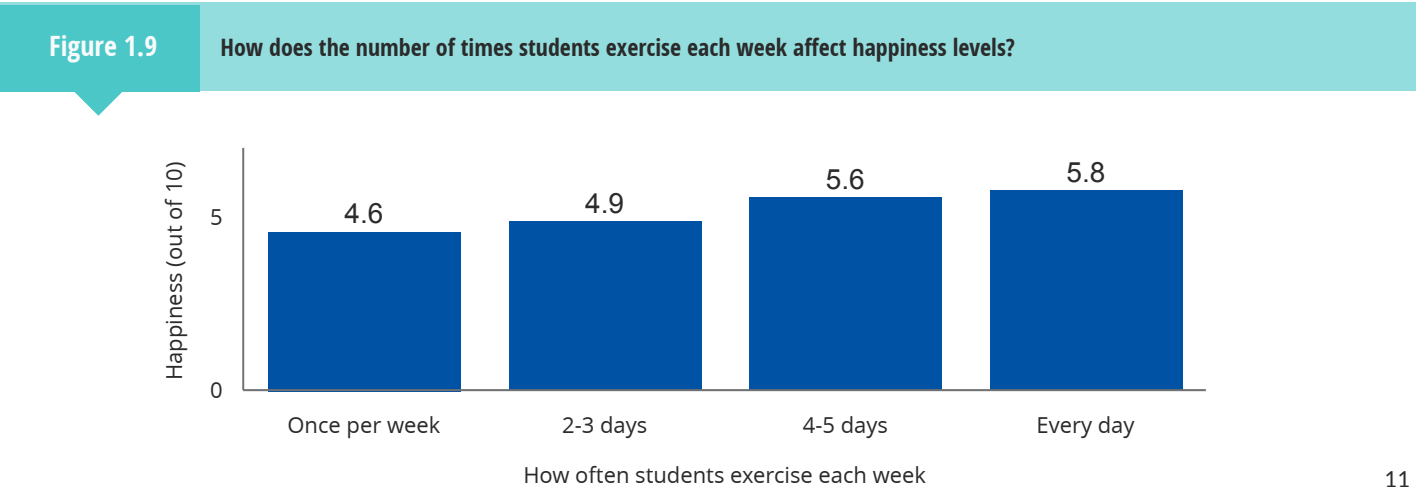
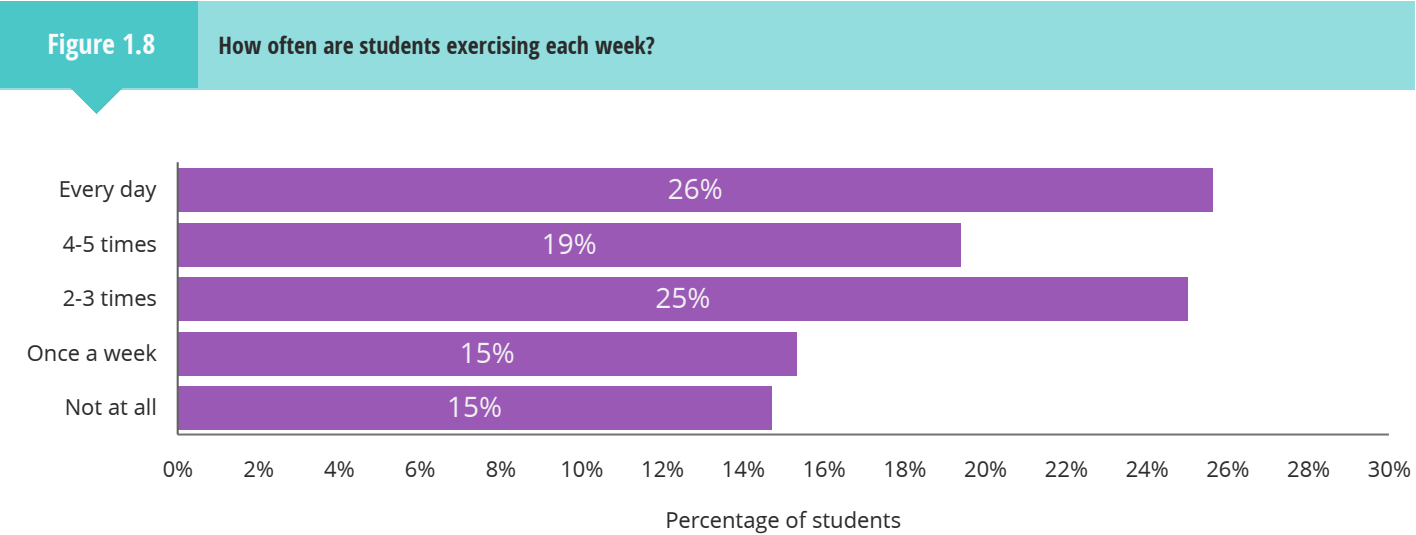
There's a lot of indecision at the moment but students don't seem put off going to university. Instead, they seem to be holding off making decisions until there's more certainty around which universities will be opening up their campuses and which countries they'll be able to travel to safely.

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.

A quarter of students surveyed are doing some form of exercise every day, with only 15% doing no exercise at all.

There are clear positive characteristics among those students exercising daily. They’re happier, less likely to report feeling lonely, 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.



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 5.7 out of 10, compared to 4.9 for those unable to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 74% of students who report not feeling lonely are able to stay in touch with friends as much as they’d like compared to only 47% 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 a 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?

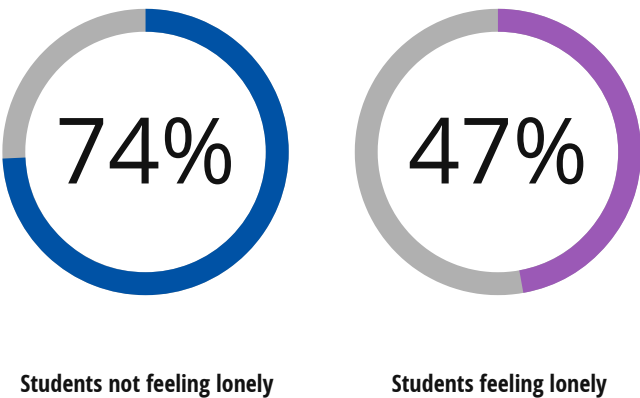
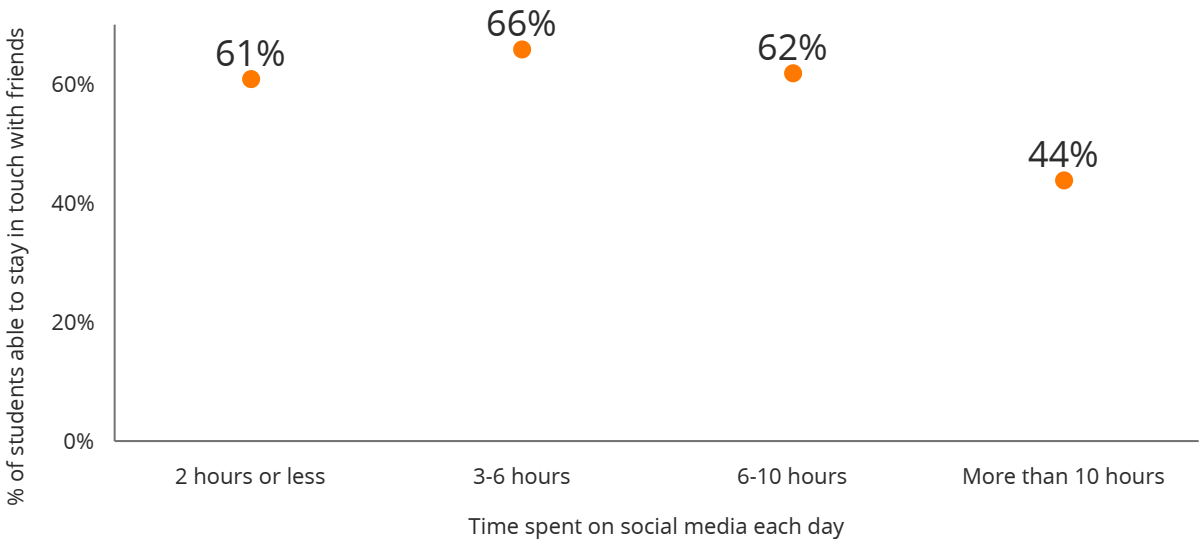


Figure 1.11

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. It was the factor significantly higher among those students who reported negative psychological wellbeing, including being stressed or anxious, lonely, and unhappy.

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 help students keep in touch with friends, over a third of students surveyed are online for longer than six hours each day, with 8% online for over ten hours a day. This means that this 8% 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 28% of students spending more than ten hours a day on social media reporting being stressed or anxious every day the past week. High social media use is also associated with lower levels of happiness, with those students using social media for two hours or less each day the most happy, scoring their happiness 5.8 out of 10, compared to 5.1 out of 10 for those spending more than ten hours a day online.

Figure 1.12

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

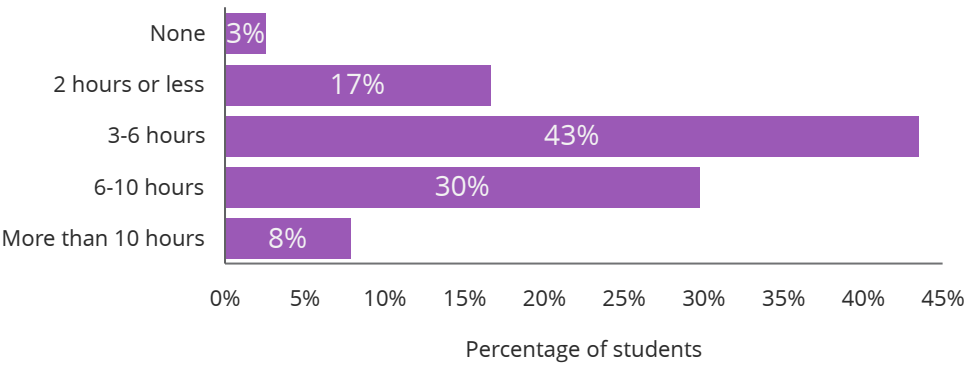
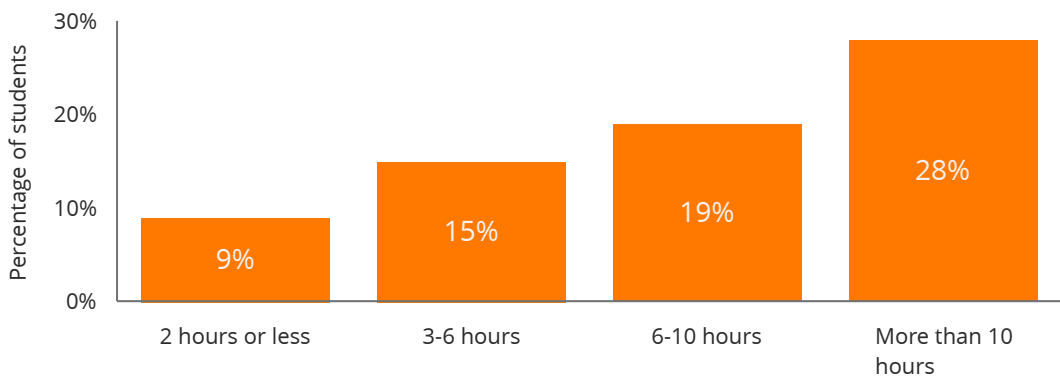


Figure 1.13

What percentage of students who spend different periods of time on social media each day report feeling stressed or anxious every day over the past week?



EXPERT VIEW

positive.™

Positive Group are a team of psychologists supporting 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 and counselors 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 COUNSELORS

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

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting uncertainty around university and destinations has had an impact on students' decision making. With all the various options available - online-learning, deferring a place till next year, re-

applying in 2021, or even choosing another university to attend – it's a difficult time for students. We've seen this difficulty reflected in both students' use of the Unifrog platform and in the survey results.



DISRUPTED DECISION MAKING

Deciding where to go to university is one of the biggest decisions a student will make and it's a decision made even harder by the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of the international students surveyed, 23% say the pandemic has made decision making more difficult and 32% are delaying making decisions until there's more certainty.

“...23% say the pandemic has made decision making more difficult”

In more normal times, many students rely on in-person visits to colleges and universities to get a feel for the place and help decide if it's the right fit for them. Over half the students we surveyed believe that not being able to visit in-person will have an impact on their decision making, with another quarter not sure of the impact it will have.



Figure 2.1

What effect has the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' ability to make decisions?

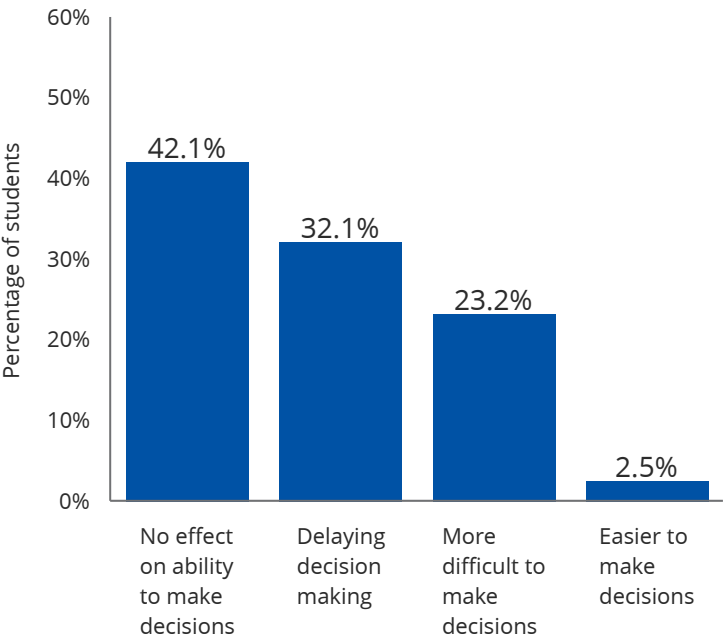
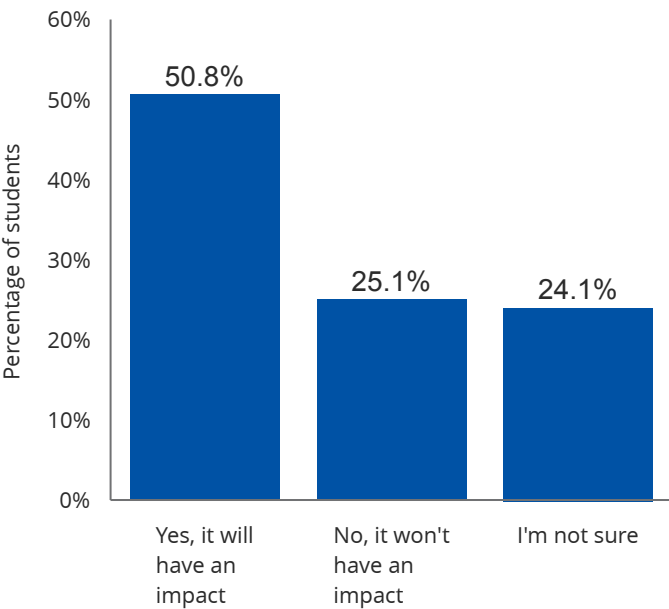


Figure 2.2

Will not being able to visit universities in-person have an impact on students' decision making?



EXPERT VIEW



David Hawkins

Director and Founder

The University Guys

David Hawkins MA (Oxford), PGCE specialises in supporting schools and their students to enter some of the world's best-ranked universities in the USA, Canada, Europe and beyond and most importantly, helping students to work out which institutions are the best match for them.

David is one of 19 people in the world to hold the gold-standard international affiliation with the Council of International Schools, one of only two Professional Members of the Independent Educational Consultants Association based in the UK, and is also a member of the International Association for College Admission Counseling.

Incorrect information

Covid-19 has caused massive disruption, making students increasingly reliant on virtual means of gaining information. Unfortunately, this means that social media, online discussion boards and simplistic media reporting is giving students incorrect information about what university will look like in 2020-21.

No one-size-fits-all approach

Even more so than ever, it's important that students get accurate guidance. University will still happen this autumn, but not in the way that we may have envisaged. Crucially, it won't be a one-size-fits-all approach. The nature of the university experience will be very different from a student intending to study Chemistry in a cramped, city-centre campus from one holding a spot to study Literature on a large, rural campus. Universities are already looking at their teaching modes, their available facilities, and their campus resources to come up with new ways to deliver an academic and social experience.

Individual decisions

For students, they need to make an individual decision: for my course, at the university I intend to go to, how happy am I with what is being offered? Importantly, is that a better or worse option than the alternative of seeking employment in a COVID-19 world?

Deferrals

If the answer is that the university proposition this autumn is unappealing, then consider deferring. Again, this will be looked at in different ways depending on the course and the university. Students shouldn't assume that they will be allowed to defer and – in an unfortunate reality – some universities' very survival will depend on getting students through the door this autumn.

Counter misinformation

For those guiding students, I would encourage you to get as much information directly to your students as possible, to counter all the misinformation. One of the great benefits of Unifrog is the Unifrog Network Facebook group, fostering community among advisers. I'd encourage you all to join!

INCREASED UNIFROG PLATFORM USE

With students holding off making decisions until there's more certainty, coupled with the shift to online learning, we've seen Unifrog platform usage increase. During the six weeks from 16 March to 26 April, we saw a 22% increase in the number of visits to the student homepage.

There was also a marked increase in the number of shortlists made across all of our university search tools, except for the UK search tool. With students unable to speak to university representatives in person, it seems they're spending more time researching opportunities on the Unifrog platform instead.

The search tool that saw the biggest increase in the number of shortlists made was the Canadian universities tool, with 36% more shortlists created than during the same period last year.

This perhaps reflects the perception among international students that Canada has handled the COVID-19 pandemic comparatively well. Interestingly, despite the drop in shortlists on the UK universities tool, the second biggest increase was on our Oxbridge college search tool which saw a 31% increase in the number of shortlists created. This tallies up with counselors telling us that students are becoming increasingly aspirational as they believe there may be less competition for places at prestigious universities this year.

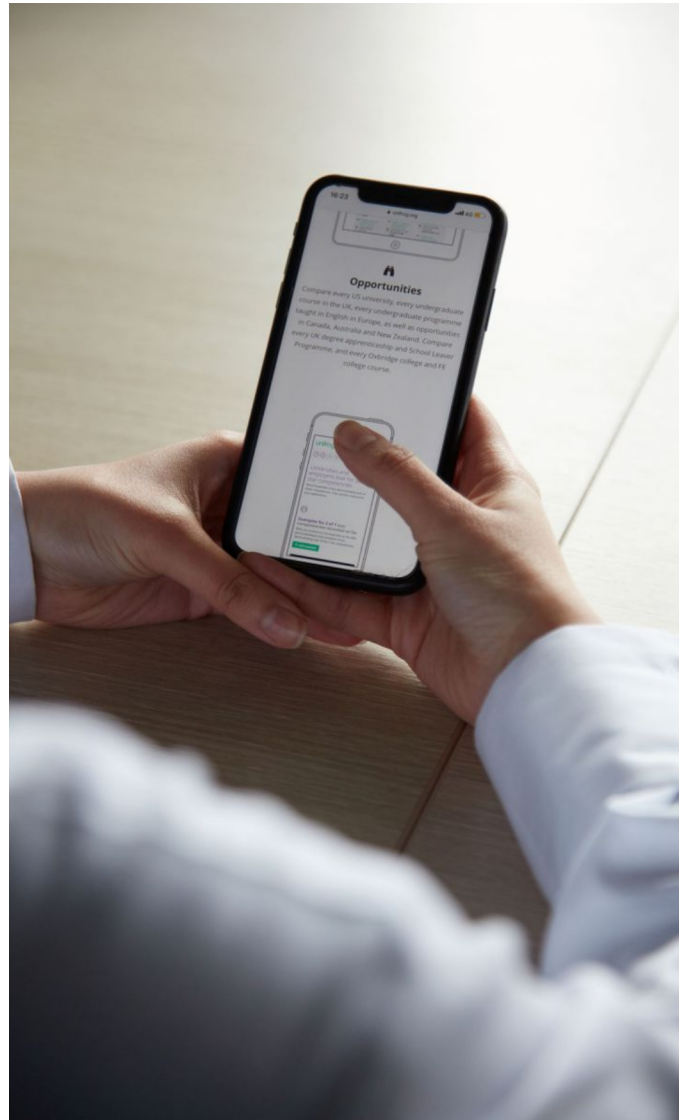
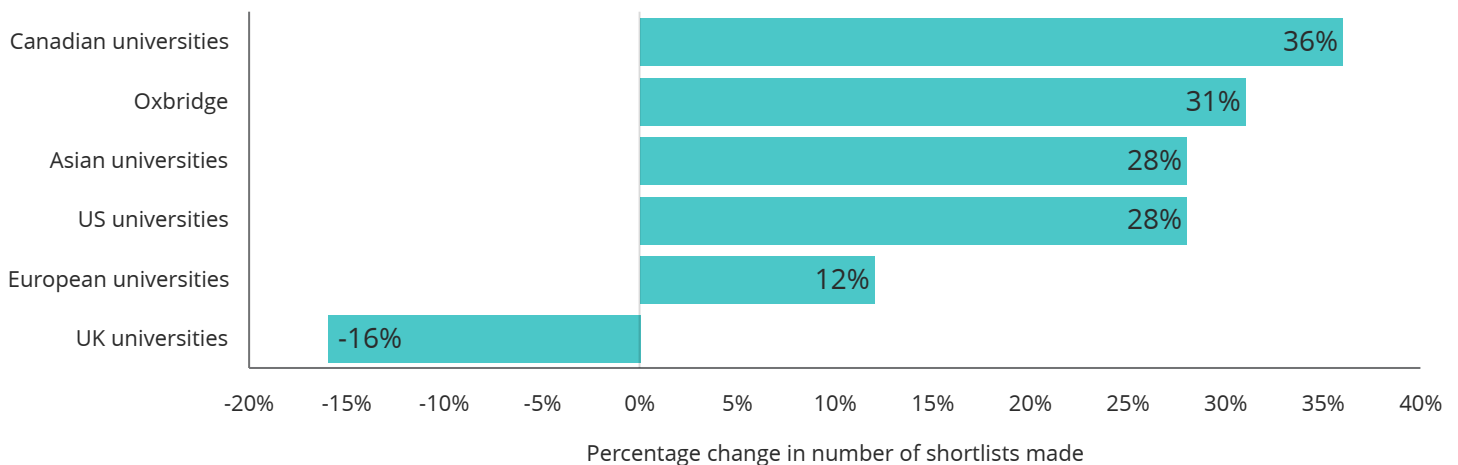


Figure 2.3

What has been the percentage change in the number of shortlists made on Unifrog's university search tools during the 6 weeks from 16 March to 26 April, compared to the same period in 2019?



EXPERT VIEW



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Tom Whittaker

International Recruitment Officer

The University of British Columbia

Tom Whittaker gives advice to counselors on how UBC is responding to the pandemic and how they can best support and advise their students.

Greater flexibility

At UBC, we are committed to ensuring no student is disadvantaged by the disruption to their academic studies as a result of the pandemic. For those due to start in 2020, we are allowing greater flexibility in terms of final grades, as well as extending deadlines for accepting offers.

Online learning

Many faculties will allow a deferral of studies until 2021, though we will be delivering high-quality online learning for the upcoming fall semester. This will include a mixture of live lectures at various times to accommodate our worldwide student-body, as well as pre-recorded lectures and seminars.

Creating a community online

Supporting students' academic success, mental health and physical wellbeing is important to us. We'll be re-creating on-campus experiences such as orientation week, clubs and societies, and residencies, through online engagement. We are even offering live campus tours through streaming! We want our students to stay connected and feel as much a part of UBC as they would if they were physically on campus.

Understanding students' motivations

When advising students, understanding their motivations for choosing a university in the first instance is crucial. Academic structure, location, campus-life, and extra-curriculars all factor into this, so choosing the best option will depend on how much the pandemic has affected what is important to them and their university experience.

Questions to ask students

Will they be motivated to study online? Will a deferral disrupt their learning habits? Will re-applying in a (likely) more competitive applicant pool for 2021 see them at risk of missing out? Is campus-life as important as academics? Perhaps the best question to ask though, is what they feel is the best environment for their academic success, happiness and personal growth. Understanding this will help you advise accordingly on the choices this group of students are facing in 2020.

DROP IN UK UNIVERSITY SHORTLISTS

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with uncertainty over the ongoing Brexit negotiations, seems likely to be behind the sharp drop in the number of UK university shortlists made. While the number of shortlists increased across all the other university search tools, the UK universities search tool saw a 16% decrease.

While the pandemic has overshadowed Brexit for the last few months, the issues Brexit raises for international students remain. What will EU students pay to attend university in the UK? Will international students need a visa to study in the UK?

“...the issues Brexit raises for international students remain.”

The centralised nature of the UK university application process also means there is less flexibility than in other countries for students who may miss their grades this year or need deadline extensions as a result of the pandemic. This could also be contributing to the drop in shortlists made as UK universities seem a less attractive option for international students who may be unsure about the final grades they're going to receive.

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 for university

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.

Find 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, we've created an Applicant Hub, full of information and resources to try and 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 as it's likely competition for places will increase next application cycle.

INTERNATIONAL DESTINATIONS

Although the majority of students (71%) say the pandemic hasn't changed the countries they're thinking of applying to go to university in, it's led a small number of students to rethink. 6% say they're now more likely to apply to university in their home country and 4% say they're less likely to apply to certain countries, with a further 19% not sure.

From speaking to counselors, this seems to be the result of a number of factors which vary from student to student. Some are applying to countries where they feel safer, be that in their home country or countries where they have resources

such as family or dual nationality. For other students, how well they perceive countries to have handled the pandemic and how quickly they imagine them to open up has also had an impact on how confident students feel applying to study there.

The table below looks at the top five destinations shortlisted by students in Europe, the Middle East, and South East Asia. It's important to note that the majority of Unifrog partner schools are British international schools which explains the UK's prominence in the rankings.

Figure 2.4

What are the top 5 destinations shortlisted by students from Europe, the Middle East, and South East Asia in the 6 weeks from 16 March to 26 April?

Students in Europe		Students in the Middle East		Students in South East Asia	
1	UK	1	UK	1	UK
2	USA	2	USA	2	USA
3	The Netherlands	3	Canada	3	Australia
4	Canada	4	The Netherlands	4	Canada
5	Australia	5	Australia	5	The Netherlands



EXPERT VIEW



INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON

Office of International Services

Indiana University

Indiana University (IU) has moved much of our recruitment and outreach work online to help students to navigate the college decision making process.

Supporting students

Our staff are meeting individually with admitted students to provide guidance and updates regarding Fall 2020 start options, deferrals, housing, and any other questions. We're seeing that deferral is more popular among students whose anticipation of a vibrant campus life, filled with student gatherings, is their driving force in deciding on IU. On the other hand, students who are eager to experience academic coursework don't seem to hesitate when considering starting online.

Advice from current students

We connect prospective and newly admitted students with our current international students via webinars, one-on-one communications, and virtual events. Our current students provide a greater understanding of the international student experience in the U.S. and guidance on how to navigate U.S. academic culture and the college environment.

Finding the right information

Many universities in the U.S. have dedicated significant thought and effort to establishing safe modified start options for the Fall 2020 term. IU created a "Restart Committee" comprised of members from IU's School of Medicine, the Fairbanks School of Public Health, and other experts to make sure all recommendations were rooted in medical and public health. We also had committees tasked with researching key areas from student life and engagement to academic bridge programs.

Reach out to admissions staff

Due to the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 many universities are changing their plans frequently based on new scientific information which can make decision making difficult for students. Where possible, students should reach out to admissions staff at their prospective institutions to have their individual questions and concerns answered.

Staying connected

While our office does offer individual appointments with international service staff members, we're focusing our efforts on coordinating opportunities for IU students to connect with prospective students in ways that allow our current student voice to be amplified. We feel strongly that these connections strengthen engagement and allow students to feel connected to the IU community.

KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

1

Encourage students in Year 13/ Grade 12 to make the most of universities' online resources such as virtual open days, MOOCs and webinars to help with their decision making.

2

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

3

When advising students, make sure you understand their motivations for choosing a university in the first instance, so you can give the best guidance on the various choices now facing them.

4

Direct students to the admissions staff at their prospective universities or colleges who will be able to answer individual queries.

5

Get as much information directly to your students as possible, to counter any misinformation they may be seeing on social media and online discussion boards.

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.

MOOCs have been around since 2008 but their popularity has soared during lockdown. This enthusiasm for MOOCs hasn't been shared equally however, with girls more likely to take a MOOC than boys.



THE RISE OF MOOCs

The Unifrog MOOCs tool allows students to search for MOOCs from providers across the world and then rank and filter by criteria including start date, duration, language and level to create shortlists of the best courses for them. We’ve seen a 172% increase in the number of these shortlists made by international students, with almost 696 more MOOC shortlists created in the six weeks from 16 March to 26 April than in the same period last year.

This was backed up by the survey, with 46% 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 or university. 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 looking to MOOCs as an alternative.



Figure 3.1 How many MOOC shortlists were created in the 6 weeks from 16 March to 26 April, compared to the same period in 2019?

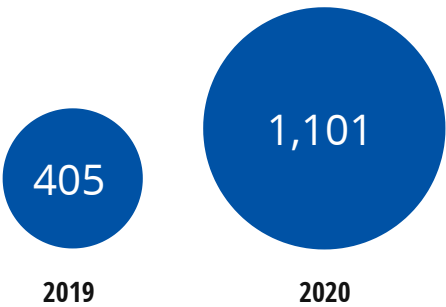
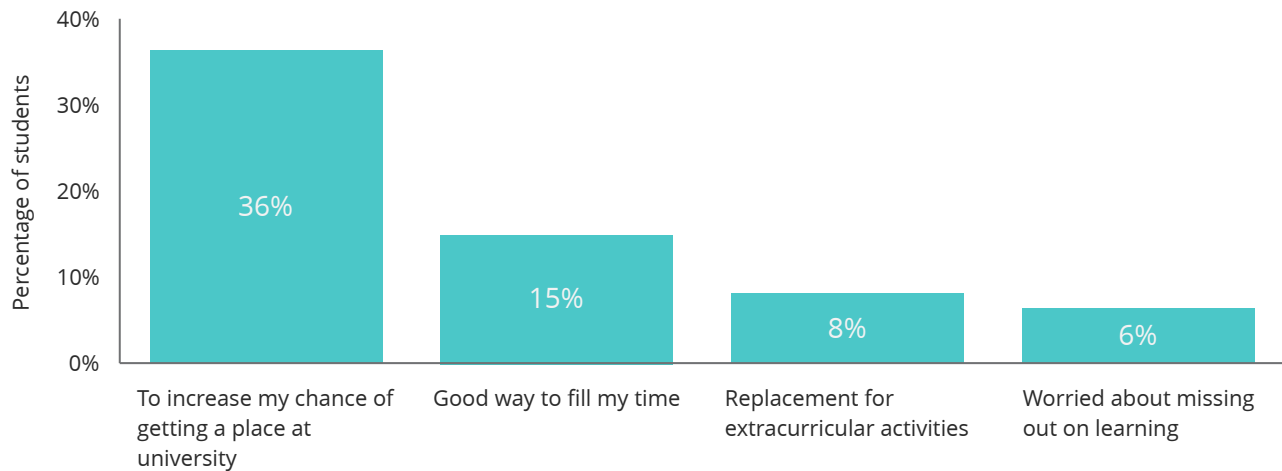


Figure 3.2 What are the main reasons students give for considering taking a MOOC?



EXPERT VIEW



Dr Rebecca Ferguson

Senior Lecturer

The Open University

The Open University (OU) is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible distance learning. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than 2 million students worldwide.

What's great about MOOCs?

MOOCs provide great learning opportunities produced by expert educators around the world on a wide variety of subjects. There's a massive amount of choice and in most cases you can join free of charge and study with learners around the world who bring their own interesting perspectives to the material. For those thinking of moving on to university study, they can provide an introduction to a subject area, to the skills needed to study at different levels, and to the universities themselves.

Why are MOOCs important now?

There are many MOOCs available that are directly relevant to the current pandemic. For example, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is running one on 'Tackling the Novel Coronavirus', and online educators have worked together to develop a course on 'How To Teach Online' that has brought together more than 50,000 teachers from around the world.

What if students don't want to learn about COVID-19?

They don't need to. MOOCs provide opportunities to develop skills, find a new hobby, or prepare for the job market. Students can even learn to build a mobile game, write their first song, or start screenwriting.

What age groups are MOOCs for?

Anyone over 13 can sign up for a MOOC. These courses can provide an introduction to a subject or a way of deepening study. For example, a student starting to learn Spanish might work through the 'Spanish for Beginners' MOOCs. More advanced learners might search the Spanish MiriadaX MOOC platform and choose to broaden their knowledge of the language by studying a short course written in Spanish in an area that interests them.

Teachers can use these courses as resources, prompting students to work through them completely or asking them to focus on just one activity or one part of the course.

Which countries can you access MOOCs from?

The major platforms are open to learners all over the world. As well as FutureLearn in the UK and MiriadaX in Spain, there are Coursera and EdX in the US, XuetangX in China, and FUN in France.

THE NEW GENDER GAP

While the number of MOOCs shortlists made has increased since last year for both boys and girls, the increase is significantly bigger for girls. While the number of MOOCs shortlists made by boys is 92% higher than last year, for girls this rises to 167%. If, as those students surveyed believe, MOOCs will help them to gain a place at university or college, it's important that teachers and counselors 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 courses that are most shortlisted on the MOOCs tool - no MOOCs appear in both the top 10 for boys and for girls. The most popular MOOCs for girls are those on Psychology and Law, whereas boys prefer Economics and Computer Science. 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 at international schools on the Unifrog platform?

Top 10 most popular MOOCs for girls

Ranking	MOOC title
1	The Psychology of Criminal Justice
2	Introduction to Psychology
3	Forensic Psychology: Witness Investigation
4	Introduction to Social Psychology
5	International Women's Health and Human Rights
6	Introduction to International Criminal Law
7	Introduction to Clinical Psychology
8	Contract Law: From Trust to Promise to Contract
9	Introduction to Psychology: The Psychology of Personality
10	Medical Terminology

Top 10 most popular MOOCs for boys

Ranking	MOOC title
1	Introduction to Computer Science and Programming Using Python
2	Python Programming Essentials
3	Bonds & Stocks
4	Particle Physics: an Introduction
5	Microeconomics
6	Time Value of Money
7	Microeconomics Principles
8	IELTS Academic Test Preparation
9	Financial Accounting
10	Industrial Biotechnology

EXPERT VIEW



Justin Kurrass Ed.S, NCC

High School College and Careers Counselor
The International School of Brussels

The International School of Brussels has been encouraging its students to take MOOCs while the school is closed and lessons are being taught online.



Why teachers and counselors should encourage MOOCs

Independent reading

Being able to show independent reading is essential for university applications. With students learning remotely and the summer holidays coming up, now is the perfect time for students to showcase their independent reading by taking a MOOC.

Improving tech skills

One of the silver linings of learning from home is that students are improving their tech skills dramatically. MOOCs can play a part in this, helping students get to grips with online learning, especially for those students who may be attending university remotely in the fall.

Extracurricular replacement

With lots of students unable to do the internship programmes or summer schools they had planned, MOOCs can be a useful way of demonstrating interest in a subject or career. Some universities are even offering online summer courses which are open to everyone.

Medical MOOCs

For future medics, the COVID-19 pandemic has made gaining any work experience in a medical setting difficult. A good alternative is to take a relevant MOOC. This way, students show their initiative and keep their brain in check whilst also learning new information that will help them with future applications.

Free MOOCs are just as good

There's lots of free or low cost MOOCs out there and they're just as good as the ones you have to pay for. This is great as it means there's no financial disincentive to students thinking of taking a MOOC, they just need to find one that they're interested in!

KEY ACTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

1

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

2

In particular, encourage boys to consider taking a MOOC to prevent them being left at a disadvantage in future application cycles.

3

There are MOOCs targeted at all age levels so encourage younger students to try a short course.

4

Suggest MOOCs to students whose internship programme or summer school plans have fallen through as a way to demonstrate interest in their chosen subject or career.

5

Encourage students in Year 13/ Grade 12 to use this time to prepare for the independent learning required at university by taking a MOOC.

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



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