

THE DARKEST HOUR? NEW EVIDENCE OF THE LEARNING
EXPERIENCES, WELL-BEING AND EXPECTATIONS OF YOUTH
DURING THE THIRD NATIONAL LOCKDOWN IN THE UK.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing presents new evidence surrounding young people's employment, learning, well-being, and future expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these are connected. It does so through the reports of a representative sample of young people themselves at the beginning of February 2021 in the midst of a strict lockdown throughout the UK. The survey shows that the pandemic has had negative effects on the lives of young people in the sample in ways that affect how they see their future as well as their present state of well-being.

Learning Job Skills:

- While 44% reported that their learning of job skills had worsened as a result of the pandemic, only 13% indicated that the pandemic had led to an improvement. More than half (53%) perceived a worsening in their career prospects.
- The deterioration in the acquisition of work skills was especially a problem for those who remained in education through the pandemic. Thus, some 58% of those remaining in education thought that their learning had worsened, as opposed to just 4% who thought that their learning experience was improved.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) were very dissatisfied (3 or less on a scale of 0 to 10) with the quality of the learning resources they were allocated, and 22% were very dissatisfied with the quality of their teaching.
- Dissatisfaction with learning resources was higher among university students than among school pupils. One in three students respond that they were very dissatisfied.
- The perceived experience was more balanced for those sample members who had begun in education and made the transition into employment (11% of the full sample): although 36% of these thought that their learning had worsened, some 29% said it had increased.
- The volume of training undertaken by young people in employment has been declining slowly since 2014, but there is no evidence of a further sharp downturn during the pandemic, even for those placed on furlough. Those in employment who received training were more likely than those who received no training to record that their learning had improved as a result of COVID-19 (36% compared with 16%).

Well-being and Mental Health:

- Mental health is perceived to have deteriorated among a larger proportion of the sample than physical health.

- There was a sense of anxiety and hopelessness among many young people. Three in five respondents felt more worried, anxious and depressed than before the pandemic. About half felt less useful and less optimistic about the future. Over 60% felt less connected to their friends and significant others.
- Only some 58% of young people reported that they were satisfied with their life in the sense that they gave a rating above the mid-point.
- Young women collectively experienced relatively greater negative effects on their wellbeing than young men. Well-being was also disproportionately worsened among all young people who were struggling financially before the pandemic.
- Young people's dissatisfaction with life was associated with COVID-19 indirectly, through the perceived effect it had had on loss of learning. While the level of life dissatisfaction was 36% among those who perceived that their skills had worsened, it was only 20% among those whose learning was unaffected. However, there is no notable link between life satisfaction and having experienced direct health effects of the disease at first hand or among family and close friends.
- In contrast, COVID-19 had both direct consequences for mental distress and indirect consequences for mental distress via learning loss and loss of social connectedness.

The Future:

- About half of the surveyed youth felt less optimistic about the future than they were before the first lockdown began.
- Even though their optimism has taken a hit, many young people were hopeful about their immediate futures: 43% expected improvement in their immediate financial situation, while 20% thought that their finances would become worse.
- The majority showed some optimism about their long-term prospects, in particular about having a fulfilled social life, enjoying good health, owning their own home, and finding a well-paid and enjoyable job. Thus, 57% thought it quite or very likely that they will find a well-paid job, and 60% that they will be in a job that they enjoy doing.
- The pandemics' perceived detrimental effect on job skills development makes young people less optimistic about their chances of finding a well-paid and enjoyable job. They do not need reminding by experts of how they can be 'scarred' by a loss of learning of job skills: they already know and fear the effects.

About the Survey.

This briefing presents first findings from the first wave of a new longitudinal survey of the employment and health prospects of Britain's youth. The questionnaire focused on the perceived effects of COVID-19 as reported by young people themselves, while also gauging their education or employment status, how it had changed since March 2020, their learning experiences both in education and employment, and their hopes and expectations for the future.

The survey, which was undertaken online by IPSOS, sampled 1000 young people. Interviews were carried out online among adults aged 16-25 who are members of panels managed by Ipsos MORI and partners from 5th to the 12th February. Quotas were set according to age within gender, working status and region. Additional weights were provided and used in all our analyses, ensuring representativeness within Britain according to these variables. We discuss findings which would be statistically significant if the data were drawn from a probability sample, but note that statistical inferences for the UK population are strictly invalid: being a quota sample, confidence intervals are unknown. As a rough guide, for a random sample of 1,000, the margin of error would be 3 percentage points to either side of the estimate. For group comparisons within the same random sample, the margin of error would increase as group sizes drop (e.g., to 4.4 percentage points if the sample were split into two groups of N=500). In this paper, we focus our discussion on differences and associations that would be large enough to be significant in a probability sample of the same size.

The next wave of the survey is scheduled for April 2020, and four subsequent waves are planned over 2021 and 2022. Each survey will re-interview respondents from the previous wave, where consent is given, and be refreshed using the same procedures to deliver a constant sample size.

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1. INTRODUCTION: COVID-19 AND BRITAIN'S YOUNG ADULTS.

This paper is motivated by heightened economic and social concern at the start of 2021 for the needs of young people in and beyond the pandemic emergency. Its aim is to present new and timely evidence surrounding young people's employment and mental health, and their expectations for the future, through the reports of young people themselves.

Right from the start of the first national lockdowns in March of 2020, employment prospects were expected to be worst affected for young workers, judging both from the way young people had fared in earlier crises and from the concentration, prior to the pandemic, of young people in the most COVID-vulnerable sectors such as leisure and hospitality.¹ By Autumn these fears were already being realised. The UK unemployment rate for those aged 18 to 24 was rising since the middle of 2020, and by the last quarter had reached 11% among women and 15% among men.² At the end of the year, some 20% of women and 17% of men had been placed on furlough. Among 16-17 year olds not in education, it was worse: the unemployment rate had reached 22% and the proportions on furlough had reached 39% for women, 29% for men.³ This specific vulnerability of youth to unemployment extended to many countries beyond the UK.⁴

Similarly, mental health has been a concern since the first lockdown, according to the survey evidence.⁵ In both the UK and elsewhere young people – especially young women – have experienced greater increases in mental distress than older generations.⁶ Life satisfaction – a commonly used measure of well-being – has been lower on average than before the pandemic but has varied through the seasons and the stages of lockdown: it rose through the summer as the first wave of the pandemic withdrew, then from September declined systematically across all groups for four months as restrictions were renewed and intensified. In early January the life satisfaction of 18-29-year-olds, which was always below that of older age groups, reached a low point.⁷ Students, in particular, were reporting alarmingly high levels of loneliness and anxiety.⁸

Employment losses and mental distress are potentially long-lasting. The COVID-19 risk, it was predicted, was not just for an immediate rise in youth unemployment rates but for a long-term 'scarring' of pay and employment prospects for a whole cohort of youth trying to make the transition from education into employment.⁹ One key mechanism through which scarring occurs is the loss of opportunity for young people to acquire work skills in the years immediately after leaving education – either because of unemployment or because of being obliged to accept employment in jobs with fewer opportunities for skill development. Even for those who gain employment, the amount of training that young people receive has been declining for several years; and it is unclear whether the COVID-19 lockdown would have further reduced access to training, perhaps also limiting its quality.¹⁰

This potential reduction in skill acquisition among young workers runs parallel to threats to the quantity and quality of education. Irregular school and college closures during successive stages of the emergency, the patchy switch to online learning at all levels, and the accompanying uncertainties experienced by those affected by the attempt to hold national exams as usual in the summer of 2020, all contribute to a potential lowering of skill in the workforce of future years. From the macro-economic perspective of restoring long-term growth, the expected loss of skill acquisition among young people – whether at work or in education – appears all the more serious in the light of the acknowledged need to replace many migrants' skills in the post-Brexit, post-COVID British economy.¹¹

The extraordinary, cumulative negative experiences of the pandemic could be predicted to diminish the optimism of young people as they contemplate the future in the middle of lockdown. Where that happens, the risk is that lowered expectations about future opportunities will influence motivations and behaviour in the present and thus in a vicious circle reduce investments into skills, job search and career development.¹² Indeed, the outlook for Britain's youth at the beginning of 2021 has been far from propitious. The number of people dying every day from COVID-19 peaked at over 800 in the middle of January. While the vaccination programme was getting under way, all nations of the UK were in the midst of the prolonged third lockdown. By the time of the Chancellor's budget speech on 3rd March the macro-economic future, upon which young people's employment prospects depend greatly, was forecast to be for a 4% growth in GDP in 2021, but this was on the back of a 10% decline in 2020.

In this paper we first report how young people themselves perceive that they have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thereafter we show how these effects are associated with their mental health and well-being. And in the final section we turn to young people's expectations, and take a look at factors that may have helped to bolster a more positive outlook despite the circumstances of the pandemic.

2. EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON LEARNING, MENTAL HEALTH AND CAREER PROSPECTS.

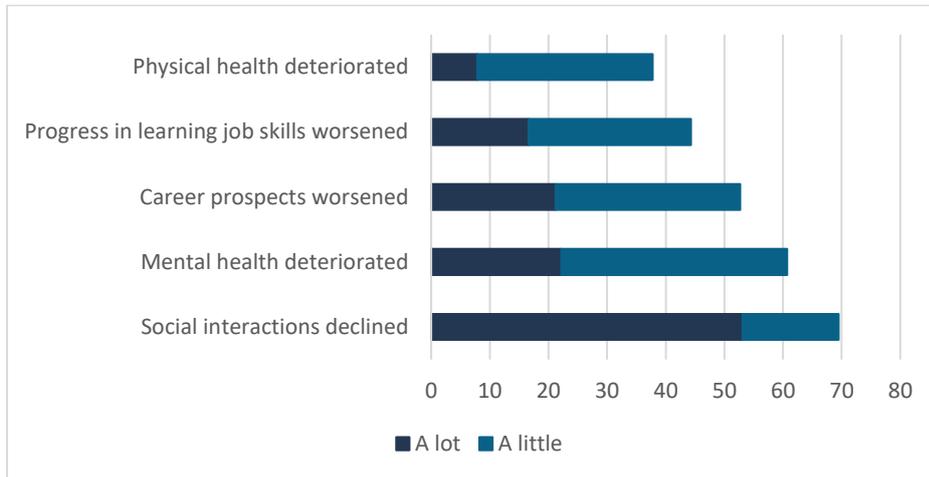
The representative sample of young people in the survey reflects the circumstances at large in which young people found themselves in early February 2021. For many of the young people interviewed, the disease was no abstract concept that they saw only in the media: one in three reported, either that they had tested positive for COVID-19, or that a family member or close friend had suffered serious illness or died as a result of the pandemic. The remaining two thirds were also affected indirectly by the restrictive measures imposed. Among those who had left education (57% of the sample), one in nine were unemployed, and of those employed nearly one in five had been placed on furlough.

To capture perceptions of both the direct and indirect effects, the survey asked all respondents to indicate how the pandemic had affected their physical and mental health, their education and learning.¹³ Respondents were also asked about how their social interaction with friends had changed. Most felt able to comprehend and therefore respond to these questions, as signalled by the relatively small proportions of 'don't knows' in the responses. Specifically, the questions asked were: "Overall, to what extent do you think your progress in learning job skills has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic?"; "To what extent, if at all, do you think your overall educational progress has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic?"; "How has, if at all, your physical or mental health changed as a direct or indirect result of the coronavirus pandemic?"; "To what extent, if at all, do you think your career prospects have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic?"; finally, "Has your amount of social interaction you have with friends, relatives or colleagues who you don't live with changed since the start of the FIRST lockdown on 23rd March 2020?".

The pandemic is perceived to have had negative effects on the lives of young people in all these aspects. For example, while 44% reported that their learning of job skills had worsened as a result of the pandemic, only 13% indicated that the pandemic had led to an improvement. According to Figure 1, more than half (53%) perceived a worsening in their career prospects. It can also be seen

that mental health deteriorated among a larger proportion of the sample than physical health. The largest impact, unsurprisingly, is on the proportion of young people who reported fewer social interactions (69% of the sample).

FIGURE 1. The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People's Lives: Proportions Affected.



Understanding the deteriorating learning experience

Looking to the future beyond the pandemic lockdown, the fact that 44% of young people record a worsening of their learning experience as a result of COVID-19 is especially concerning. Respondents who reported a prior health condition that limited their ability to carry out day-to-day activities including participating in education or work, were even more likely (51%) to say that their learning had suffered.

As noted above, the loss of skills acquisition could be expected to have long-term consequences if there are no opportunities to catch up when work and school return to normal. Here, we attempt to unpack the source of this perception. Is the worsening of skill acquisition especially a phenomenon of those who have been in education, or is it true also of those who have been in employment? To what extent is the experience linked to the education-to-work and other transitions made (or not made) during the year?

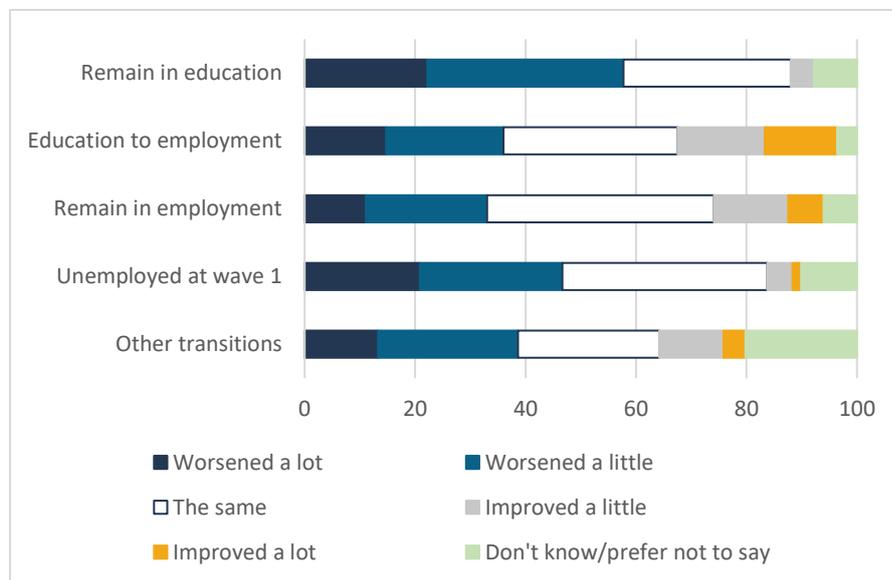
Figure 2 shows that the deterioration in the acquisition of work skills was worst for those who remained in education through the pandemic (37% of the sample). Thus, some 58% of those remaining in education thought that their learning had worsened, as opposed to just 4% who thought that their learning experience was improved. Similar findings have been reported across the world, with education having been disrupted globally.¹⁴

These experiences in education are reflected in the satisfaction levels recorded by young people with what their educational institutions were providing. Nearly a quarter (23%) were very dissatisfied (3 or less on a scale of 0 to 10) with the quality of the learning resources they were allocated, and 22% were very dissatisfied with the quality of their teaching.

University students were especially discontented, with one in three saying that they were very dissatisfied with their learning resources. This high prevalence of dissatisfaction would appear to reflect the widely reported experiences of locked-down students.¹⁵ As could be expected, dissatisfaction was especially prevalent among those students reporting that their learning of job skills had been most affected: among those university students who reported that their learning of job skills had worsened a lot or a little, some 39% reported that they were very dissatisfied.

The perceived experience was more balanced for those sample members who had begun in education and made the transition into employment (11% of the full sample): although 36% of these thought that their learning had worsened, some 29% said it had increased. It is re-assuring, if unsurprising, that making a successful transition into work yields a positive perception about learning job skills for a more sizable proportion of the sample.

FIGURE 2 The Perception of Learning Loss by Education-Employment Transition Status



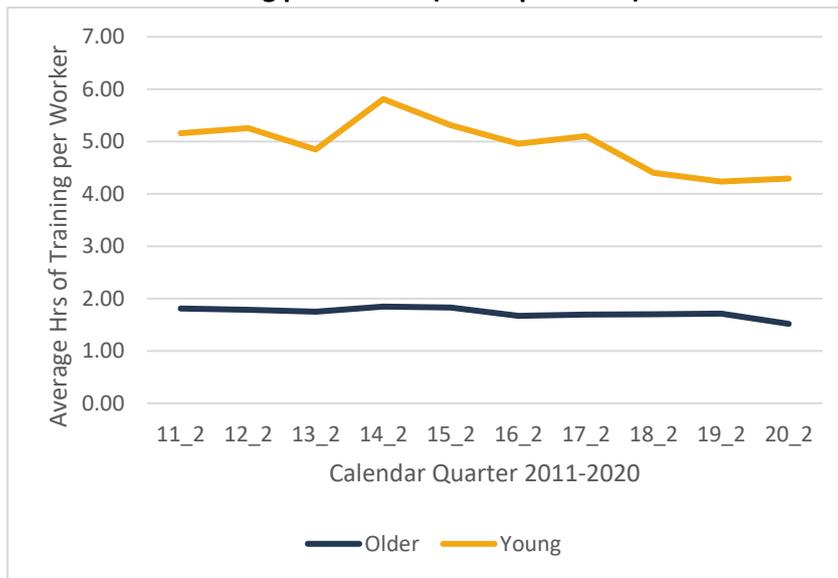
For those unemployed at wave 1, the perceived effect of the pandemic has been overwhelmingly negative, as might be expected from the theory of unemployment scarring. Yet deterioration on balance -- some 33% negative versus 20% positive -- is also reported by those who were in employment both before the pandemic and at wave 1.

Among those employed, learning could have improved for some, if slack work time (or furlough) allowed them to devote more time to training; moreover, many would have had to learn the skills needed to work remotely. On the other hand, learning through interaction with others at work could have diminished, and some employers may have been obliged to cut discretionary training funds. As noted above, training volumes for young people have been on a long-term declining trend. It might also be feared that the training afforded to young people during lockdown has been of a lower quality, owing to the difficulties in many cases of arranging face-to-face instruction and the need to rely on internet materials and online meetings with tutors.

Using data from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Figure 3 shows that, after peaking in 2014, the volume of training for young (16-25) people in employment was declining -- resuming the long-term

downward trend found in earlier studies. However, there is no evidence of a further sharp downturn in the second quarter of 2020, encompassing most of the period of the first pandemic lockdown. While the rate of participation fell slightly, those young people who did undertake training were able to do so for a longer duration in 2020, compared with the same period in 2019 (28 hours versus 24 hours). Fewer could participate among those young workers placed on furlough, but since they did so for longer the net effect on average duration per worker on furlough was neutral.

FIGURE 3 Volume of Training per Worker (Hours per week)



The employed respondents to our survey also reported a high prevalence of participation in job-related training in the previous four weeks (37%). Those who did receive training were more likely than those who received no training to record that their learning had improved as a result of COVID-19 (36% compared with 16%).

Most of our survey respondents who received training reported that their training was of a good quality, in that it increased their skills either ‘a little’ (58%) or ‘a lot’ (34%), with only a small proportion (8%) registering that the training was of no use in raising their skills.

Only a few (5%) of our participants were undertaking apprenticeships or internships at the time of the first wave of the survey: unsurprisingly these were more likely than other workers to have had some training in the previous four weeks (63% compared with 36%), though surprisingly there remained a minority that said that they had done no training.

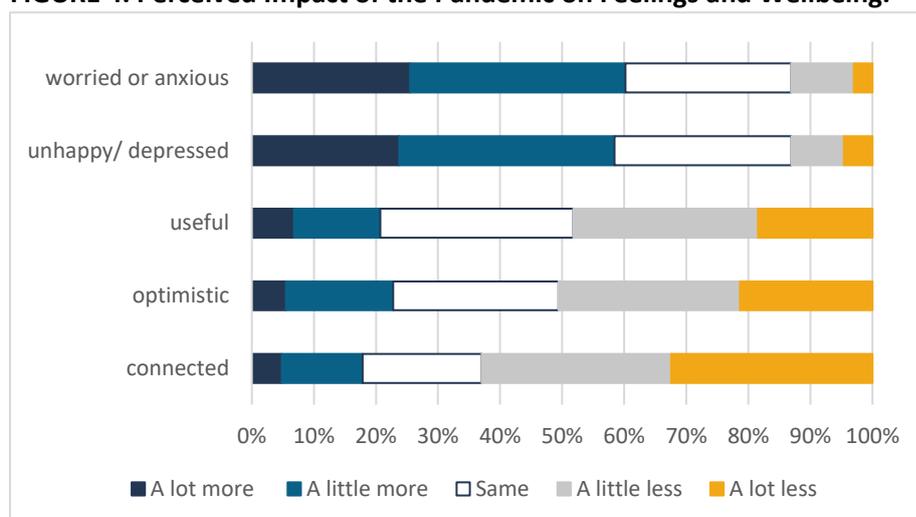
In short, those remaining in education report a loss of learning. Those who moved from education into employment on balance avoided perceived damage to their skills progression. Nevertheless, for those remaining in employment but who were not receiving training, the effects of COVID-19 on learning are perceived to be negative on balance.

3. YOUNG ADULTS' WELLBEING AT THE START OF 2021.

As noted in the introduction, previous studies have found that in its first stages the COVID-19 pandemic was already having a detrimental impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Our new survey investigated how the pandemic had changed young people's feelings and expectations by the time of the third lockdown. They were asked: "On balance, compared to the period just before the FIRST lockdown, which started on 23rd March 2020, would you say that you are now doing more or less or about the same of each of the following? Feeling worried or anxious, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling useful, feeling optimistic about the future, feeling connected with other people."

FIGURE 4. Perceived Impact of the Pandemic on Feelings and Wellbeing.



According to their responses, a quarter felt a lot more worried or anxious now than before the pandemic (Figure 4). A similar proportion reported being a lot more unhappy or depressed. About half of the surveyed youth felt less useful and were less optimistic about the future. Over 60% felt less connected to their friends and significant others during the third national lockdown. These predominantly negative findings are consistent with the earlier evidence.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has had, on balance, such adverse perceived effects on young people, where does it leave their state of wellbeing and how they think about the future? Previous studies have shown that wellbeing, aspirations and expectations of the future can shape current behaviour and investments into skills, job search and career development.¹⁶

Depression and Anxiety

Worries about the future, the limitations on day-to-day activity and the feeling of isolation are likely to have left a mark on mental health and distress. To measure mental distress, the survey asks young people about symptoms of depression and anxiety. Young people report how frequently in the last week they felt 1) fearful, 2) nervousness or shakiness inside, 3) hopeless about the future, 4) blue and 5) worried too much about things. Responses ranged from 'Not at all' to 'Extremely'.¹⁷

FIGURE 5. Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety Among Young People, Feb 2021.

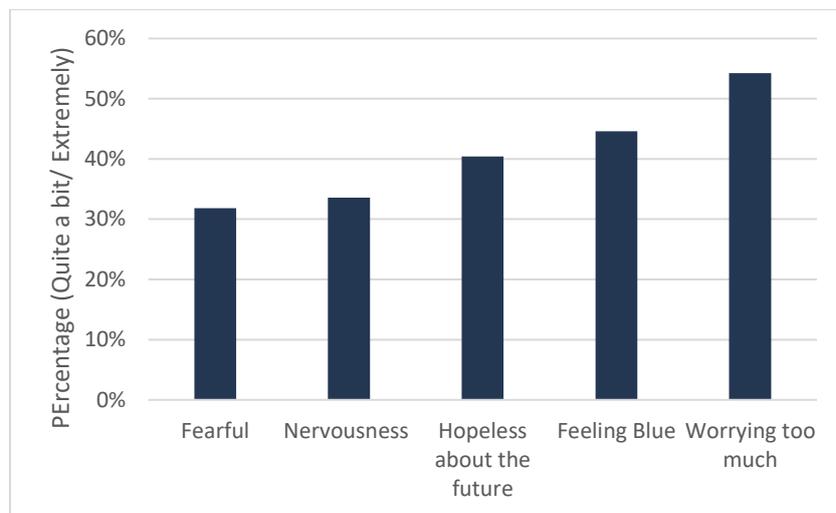


Figure 5 displays the distribution of symptoms of poor mental health. Consistent with the story that emerged from Figure 4, a substantial fraction of young people in the sample felt hopeless about their future (40%), felt generally blue (45%) and stated that they worried too much about things (54%).

However, poor mental health is not equally distributed. Young women, people who identify as non-binary, those with limiting prior health conditions, and those who struggled to make ends meet before the pandemic reported higher levels of mental distress. Some of these inequities have existed before the pandemic hit. By contrast, young people in working-class households and whose parents did not graduate from university felt more positive about their mental wellbeing.

These findings reveal that young people were still struggling to cope with the impact of the pandemic on their lives in February 2021. Far from adapting over time to the constraints imposed, the prolonged and repeated lockdowns and health insecurities appear to have left their mark. How did this leave their overall state of well-being?

Life Satisfaction

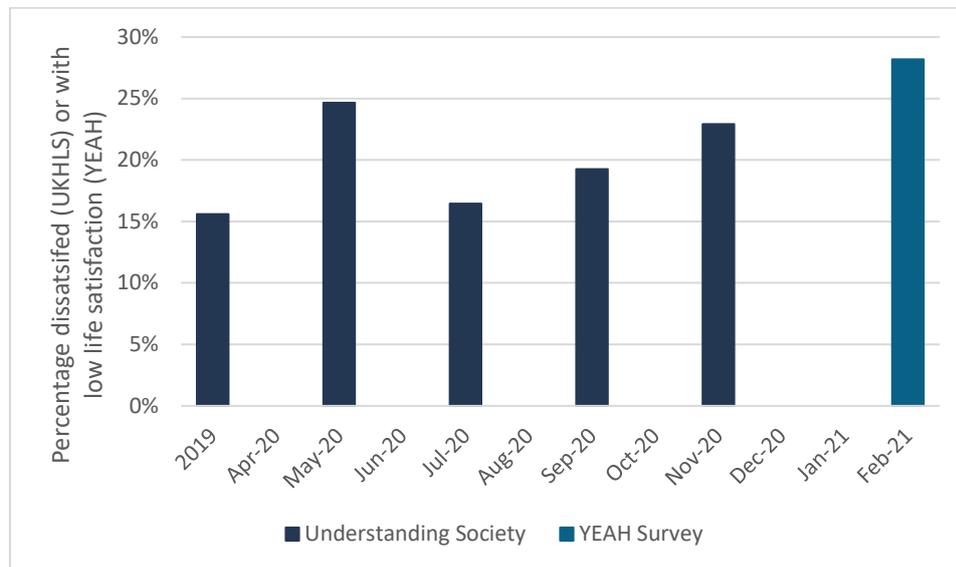
We asked respondents, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?" with their ratings on a scale from 0 to 10. Only some 58% of young people reported that they were satisfied with their life in the sense that they gave a rating above the mid-point of 5.

Similar questions are used widely to study life satisfaction. For example, the Understanding Society COVID-19 survey¹⁸ fields a very similar question, albeit on a 7-point rating scale. To measure trends in wellbeing, we can compare the percentage with 'low satisfaction' (here defined as below the mid-point of 5) according to our survey with the fraction of young adults in Understanding Society who expressed dissatisfaction (below the mid-point) with their lives.

Consistent with the poor external environment, with our findings on mental health and with previous studies, the survey confirms the huge challenges for young people's wellbeing and their struggle to stay positive in lockdown – see Figure 6. Almost 3 in 10 (28%) reported low satisfaction with their life. This proportion was not far off the percentage who reported life dissatisfaction

towards the end of the first lockdown. This prevalence of dissatisfaction comes after a steady deterioration since the summer of 2020.

FIGURE 6. Percentage Reported Dissatisfaction with their Life (UKHLS) and Low Life Satisfaction (YEAH)



There are some critical, predictable differences in life satisfaction between young people. For example, in our survey, two groups of young people were more likely to report low life satisfaction: those who had found it hard to make ends meet before the crisis and those with limiting health conditions. Conversely, young people who owned their accommodation outright were more likely to be satisfied.

Nonetheless, the earlier upward turn in life satisfaction during the summer of 2020 shows that wellbeing can change with current circumstances – July being a time with relatively few restrictions and low levels of COVID-19 infection. Thus, it is possible that, given the right circumstances, life satisfaction might recover again when restrictions begin to be lifted once more.

Direct and Indirect Effects of COVID-19 on Well-Being

What aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic might lie behind the overall low level of life satisfaction and high mental distress levels? The pandemic affects young people's lives through multiple direct and indirect channels. On the one hand, there are *direct* consequences of having been ill or a family member or close friends having become seriously ill or died. On the other hand, an *indirect* channel through which wellbeing might have suffered is through the lockdown itself, via social isolation and loneliness, as noted above. In addition, there are further potential indirect effects that follow from the downgrading of skills learning prospects.

As detailed earlier, the survey asked young people to report their experiences of having fallen ill with COVID-19 and the experience of illness and death among family and friends, changes in the amount of socialising, and the perceived consequences of the pandemic on job skills development. To illustrate what pathways matter for life satisfaction and mental distress, we compare average wellbeing outcomes for those who have experienced the pandemic's direct effects with those who have not; we then do the same comparison for those who experienced indirect effects.

FIGURE 7. Low Life Satisfaction and Poor Mental Health by Direct and Indirect Pandemic Effects.¹⁹

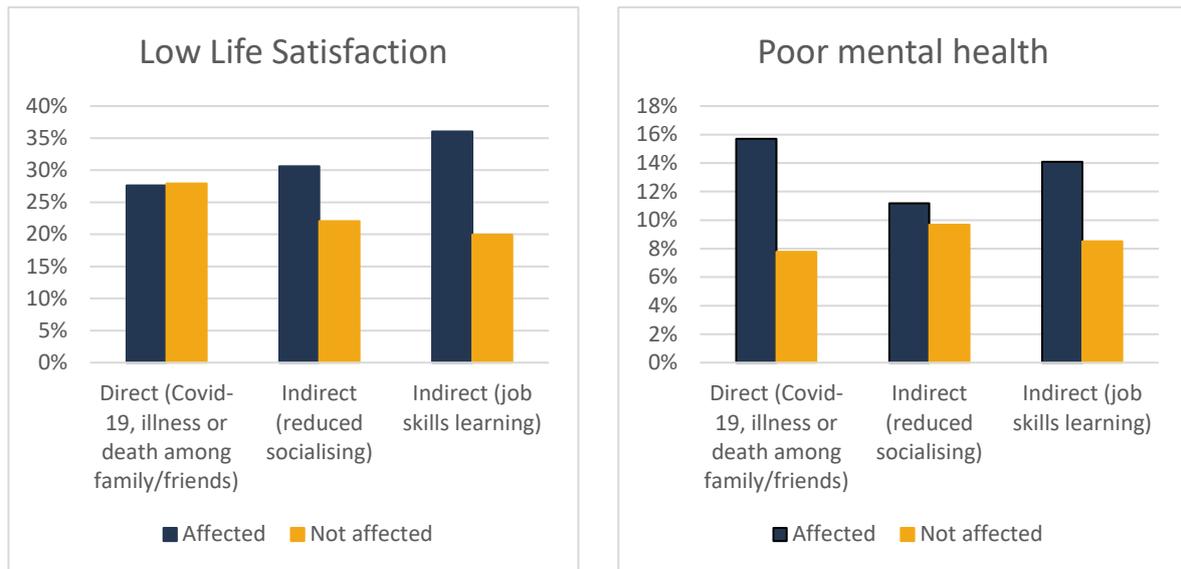


Figure 7 summarises these comparisons, and shows that there were significant differences by channel. According to the left-hand bar chart there was a 16 percentage point difference (36% versus 20%) in the prevalence of low life satisfaction, comparing those who felt that the pandemic had worsened their job skills development with those who perceived no adverse job skills consequences. By contrast, low life satisfaction was about equally prevalent whether or not respondents had to cope with direct consequences from COVID-19. In other words, it was the indirect channel, via the reduction in job skills learning, that seems to be influencing life satisfaction.

But that is not to say that worries about one's health and others' wellbeing did not take their toll. According to the right-hand bar chart, in our sample young people who had had direct experience of COVID-19 reported higher levels of mental distress than those who did not.²⁰

Besides job skills concerns, the changes in socialising brought about by the pandemic also correlate with low life satisfaction and poor mental health. Feelings of isolation and loneliness make it harder to enjoy day-to-day activities, with adverse consequences for well-being.

In short, our survey shows young people struggling to stay positive about their current situation, with almost 3 out of 10 survey participants reporting low life satisfaction. Perceptions about the effects of the pandemic on their development of job skills emerge as a critical factor helping to account for the low levels of wellbeing we observe.

4. COVID-19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Yet, could the beginning of 2021 come to be seen as the ‘darkest hour before dawn’ for the UK’s youth? To investigate the prospects for young people through their own eyes, the survey asked respondents: “Thinking about how you see your future, what are the chances that you will have: a job that pays well, a job you enjoy doing, good health, good friends, a happy family life, be respected in the community, own your own home, that your life will turn out better for you than it has for your parents, and whether your children may have a better life than you’ve had”.

FIGURE 8: Optimism about the Future

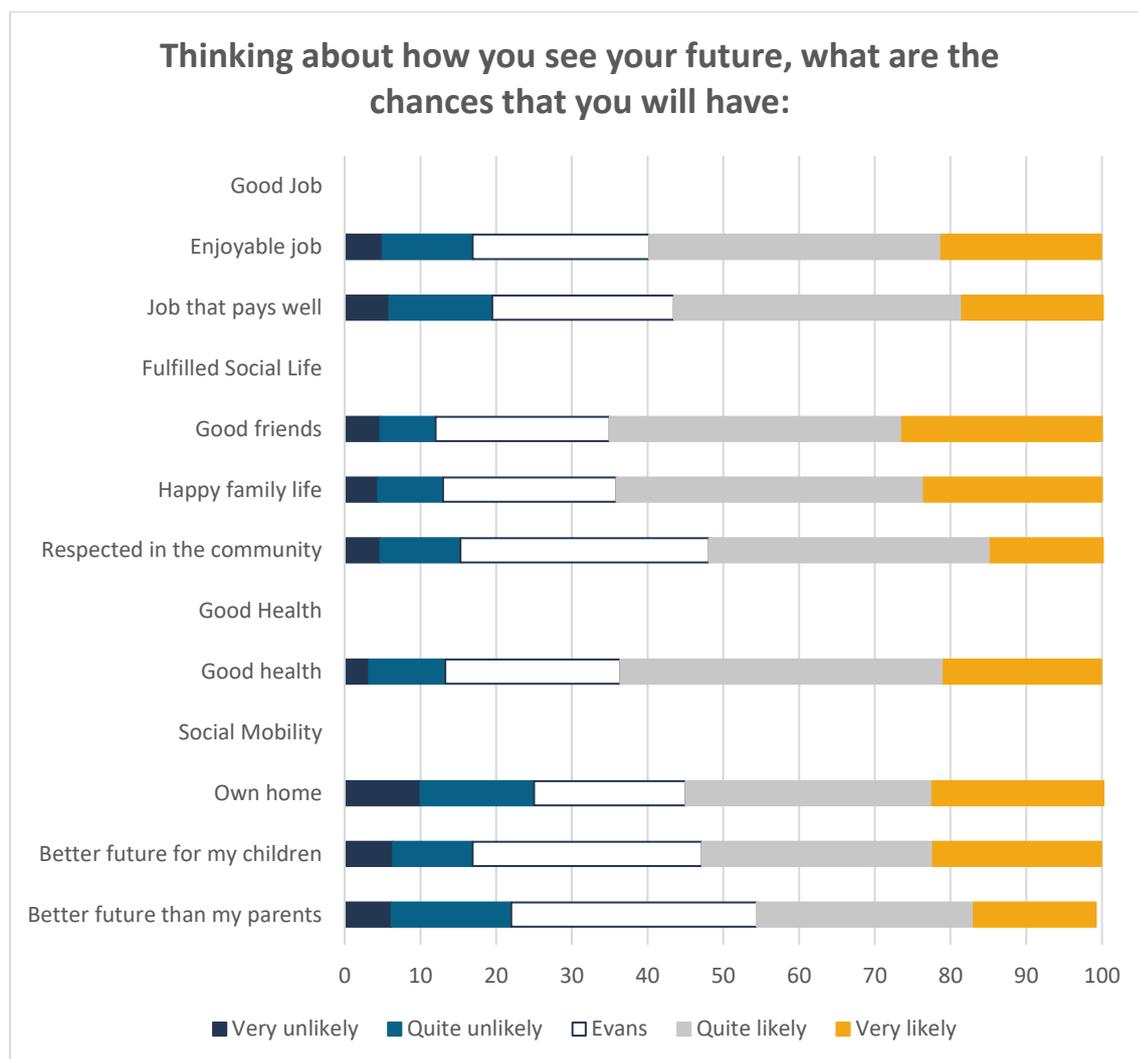


Figure 8 shows the degree of optimism regarding a range of different future outcomes (excluding the do not know/prefer not to say option). Young people were relatively optimistic about their job prospects, i.e. finding an enjoyable job (60% expect that to be quite or very likely) - or a job that pays well (56.6% expect that be quite or very likely). The majority of young people think they will have good friends and a happy family, with over 60% of respondents saying that is quite or very likely that these outcomes will occur. Over 60% of young people also think they will be in good health in the future. Moreover, 55% think that that it is likely that they will own their own home, although 25%

think that is very or quite unlikely. About half of young people (52%) think that they will be respected in their community (52%), and again about half (52%) think that their children will have a better life than they have had. Young people are, however, less optimistic about the chances that their own life will turn out better than that of their parents (46% think that this is likely, 32% think they have an even chance, and 22% think this to be very or quite unlikely).

Examining who is most optimistic about the future, the findings suggest optimism is higher among those younger than 22 years, who have no limiting health conditions, do not encounter financial hardship during the crisis, report high levels of self-efficacy, live with their partner and or child, or have a relative large number of friends (3 or more) with whom they can discuss intimate and personal matters. Those who think that their progress in learning job skills, or their career prospects have not been adversely affected by the COVID pandemic, are also more optimistic. These comparisons are statistically significant after controlling for constant age, gender, region, housing tenure, household income bracket, household social class, employment status, highest qualification of parents, and the individual financial situation before the first lockdown in March 2020.

The findings highlight the importance of social relationships for developing a positive outlook to the future (number of friends, living with partner), as well as confidence in one's own ability to solve problems and reach one's goals. Moreover, the anticipation of future outcomes reflects knowledge not only about available resources, but also about possible obstacles and constraints.²¹ Thus, it is no surprise that optimism is reduced among those who experience financial hardship, those who have poor physical health (in particular if it limits their day-to-day functioning), and those who perceive their opportunities for skill and career development to have worsened due to the pandemic.

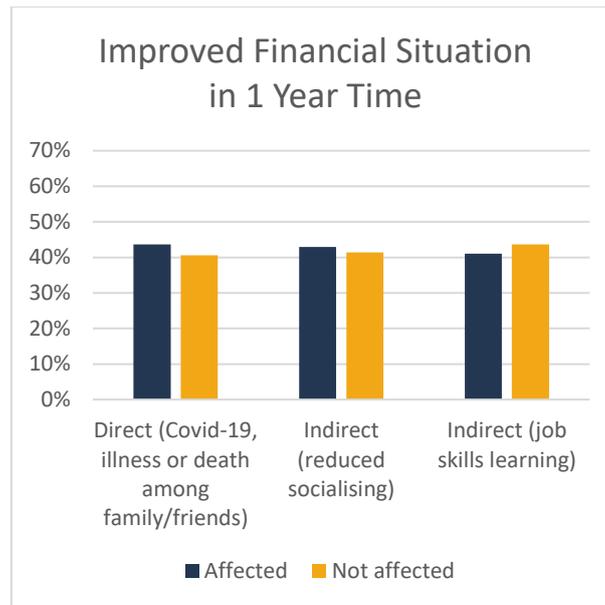
In addition to long-term outcomes, we also asked about their short-term financial security: "Thinking about your expected financial situation in a year's time from now, how well do you think you will do compared to your current situation?". Unsurprisingly, given that most would likely foresee an end to lockdown, the balance of young people expected their financial situation to improve. Nevertheless, levels of optimism regarding the immediate future (in one year's time) were lower than regarding longer-term prospects (see Figure 9). Overall, 43% expected improvement in their immediate financial situation, while 20% thought that their finances would become worse. Some 37% thought that their financial situation will be the same in one year's time.

Direct and Indirect Effects of COVID-19 on Outlook for the Future

As in Section 3, we ask what specific aspects of the pandemic might have affected young people's short- and longer-term optimism? Figure 9 suggests that the *direct* COVID-19 effects, i.e., experiences of having fallen ill with COVID-19 and/or the experience of illness and death among family and friends, did not exert a strong (or significant) influence on the indicators of optimism studied here.

FIGURE 9: COVID Effects on Indicators of Short- and Longer-Term Optimism





Rather, it was the *indirect* effects of the pandemic on job skills learning which made the largest difference in the subjective likelihood of holding a good job in future. There was a 17 percentage point difference regarding future career prospects between those who perceived their skill development to be negatively affected by the pandemic and those who did not. Young people who felt that the pandemic had had an adverse impact on their learning were less optimistic about their chances of finding a well-paid and enjoyable job. The perceived COVID-19 impact on skill development also affected young people’s expectations towards a fulfilled social life, i.e. having good friends, a happy family life and being respected in their community; and to improve their social standing in the long-run (i.e. buying their own home, doing better than their parents, and enabling their children to have a better life than they had).

In summary, the findings suggest that the majority of young people remained relatively optimistic regarding their future prospects, in particular regarding the likelihood of having a fulfilled social life, being in good health, owning their own home, and finding a well-paid or enjoyable job. The majority of young people think that their children will have a better life than they have had. They are less optimistic about their financial situation in a year’s time, but still 42% of young people consider that this will improve.

Those young people with higher levels of optimism generally have already positive social relationships, are in good health, did not experience financial hardship during the pandemic, are confident of being able to reach their goals, and do not perceive their skill development to be negatively affected by the COVID pandemic. While differences in optimism between those who experienced direct health related consequences of the pandemic and those who did not were negligible, there were larger differences on indicators of optimism between young people who felt that the pandemic negatively affected their skill development compared with those who perceived no adverse consequences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Earlier studies of COVID-19's feared effects on young people have revealed a fluctuating pattern of well-being and mental health, in the context of a youth labour market in crisis. The survey findings here confirm the heavy toll that the pandemic has wrought on young people's lives. They have also highlighted how young people perceive that they have endured a striking, substantial loss of learning, both while employed and even more so during education. The survey has also revealed a loss of optimism about the future, even though many remain hopeful of a positive future inside and outside the workplace.

The perception of lost learning is behind much of the increasing concern about the future. For those who fail to gain employment, it appears that young people do not need reminding of 'scarring' by the experts: they already know and fear the effects of unemployment. But, in addition, many of those in employment are also reporting learning loss. Most of all, our findings reinforce calls for getting back to good quality learning in schools, colleges and universities, and stress the need for catch-up programmes at all levels. Given that studies inform how expectations can affect people's sense of agency and their behaviours, young people also need hope. If we are to 'build back better' for Britain's young people – to borrow the government's catchphrase for post-COVID Britain – they require re-assurance and policies that can guarantee their future learning and skills development and ensure access to viable careers regardless of background.²²

The survey's findings from this first wave have been limited in part by the relatively small sample numbers, that prevent detailed analyses of how smaller groups, such as those on apprenticeships, have fared. The findings also rely on the validity of respondents' own reports which can be influenced by socially-determined biases. The 'effects' described are mainly those that are perceived by the respondents, not the outcomes of a quasi-experimental study.

Given the pattern of previous fluctuations, it can be expected that young people's well-being will rise as conditions improve. However, even if the employment and social environment were to return fully to 'normal' within six months it is possible that the effects of the lockdown will be cumulative and long-lasting. Future waves of the survey with partly refreshed samples will not only keep track of aggregate trends in well-being and optimism, but also permit further analyses of the variations in the effects of COVID between groups of young people, according to their social background and their pre-pandemic circumstances.

Appendix: Descriptive Statistics from the Survey.

Variable	Percentage
Age	
16-18	25.3
19-21	31.6
22-25	43.1
Gender	
Male	46.9
Female	51.4
In another way	1.7
UK region	
North & Yorkshire	13.5
North West	11.6
Midlands	17.1
South West & Wales	12.2
South East & Anglia	21.6
Greater London	14.1
Scotland	7.4
Northern Ireland	2.5
Housing tenure	
Own outright	9.7
Buying by mortgage	8.4
Privately renting	23.3
Renting from LA/HA	8.1
Live with parents	47.6
Other	2.9
Household income	
Household income <£15k	20.3
Household income £15k-£55k	53.8
Household income >55k	25.9
Household social grade	
Managerial & professional	42.4
Intermediate	30.9
Working class	26.7
Current Employment Status	
In Education	43.2
In Employment	44.9
NEET	12.0
Parents' highest qualification	
Below Level 2/Other	12.5
GCSE or eq.	17
A levels or eq.	28.7

Variable	Percentage
Level 4 or above	41.8
Free School Meal	
No	71.9
Yes	28.2
Limiting health condition	
No	75.0
Yes	25.0

¹ Resolution Foundation and the Health Foundation (2020) "Young workers in the coronavirus crisis"; Robert Joyce and Xiaowei Xu "Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed?", *IFS Briefing note*, 6 April 2020).

² Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk); M Brewer, N Cominetti, K Henehan, C McCurdy, R Sehmi & H Slaughter, Jobs, jobs, jobs: Evaluating the effects of the current economic crisis on the UK labour market, Resolution Foundation, October 2020.

³ Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: February 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

⁴ <https://www.europeactive.eu/news/forecast-COVID-19-impact-affects-youth-employment>

⁵ <http://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NIYF-OUR-VOICES-SPEAKING-TRUTH-TO-POWER-1.pdf>; https://www.healthylondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Youth_Listening_Report_Final.pdf; Henderson, M., Fitzsimons, E., Ploubidis, G., Richards, M., and Patalay, P. (2020) Mental health during lockdown: evidence from four generations - Initial findings from the COVID-19 Survey in Five National Longitudinal Studies. London: UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

⁶ Pierce M, Hope H, Ford T, Hatch S, Hotopf M, John A, Kontopantelis E, Webb R, Wessely S, McManus S, Abel KM. Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2020 Oct;7(10):883-892. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30308-4. Epub 2020 Jul 21. PMID: 32707037; PMCID: PMC7373389. Aknin, Lara B., Jan E. De Neve, Elizabeth W. Dunn, Daisy Fancourt, Elkhonon Goldberg, John Helliwell, Sarah Jones, et al. 2021. "A Review and Response to the Early Mental Health and Neurological Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *PsyArXiv*. February 19. doi:10.31234/osf.io/zw93g.

⁷ Fancourt D, Bu F, Wan Mak, H, Paul E and Steptoe, A. (2021) UCL, COVID-19 Social Study, Release 31.

⁸ [Coronavirus and higher education students - Office for National Statistics](#).

⁹ Arulampalam, W., P. Gregg and M. Gregory (2001). "Unemployment scarring." *Economic Journal* 111(475): F577-F584.

¹⁰ Green, F., A. Felstead, D. Gallie, H. Inanc and N. Jewson (2016) "The Declining Volume of Workers' Training in Britain" *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 54(2): 422-448; Green, F. and Henseke, G. (2019) 'Training Trends in Britain' Research Paper 22, Unionlearn, TUC; Li, J., A. Valero and G. Ventura (2020). *Trends in job-related training and policies for building future skills into the recovery*. London, LSE, Centre for Vocational Education Research, Discussion Paper 033.

¹¹ [Brexit: Reforms needed to help close the skills gap | Tes](#)

¹² [The new pessimism: how COVID-19 has made young people lose faith in their own agency | LSE COVID-19](#)

¹³ These reports are perceptions that require making a difficult assessment about a hypothetical situation, that is, what would have happened in the absence of the pandemic; they may be subject to cognitive, subjective biases. Nevertheless, the perceptions are informed by the respondents' unique knowledge of their own personal circumstances, and in the absence of objective tests and valid counterfactuals constitute the only available data on what happened. The questions were asked at different points during the survey.

¹⁴ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

¹⁵ [Coronavirus: Students 'scared and confused' as halls lock down - BBC News](#)

¹⁶ Delavande, A., Del Bono, E. and Holford, A., 2020. Academic and non-academic investments at university: The role of expectations, preferences and constraints. *Journal of Econometrics*. doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2020.03.019

¹⁷ Schmalbach, B., Zenger, M., Tibubos, A. N., Kliem, S., Petrowski, K., & Braehler, E. (2021). Psychometric Properties of Two Brief Versions of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist: HSCL-5 and HSCL-10. *Assessment*, 28(2), 617-631. doi:10.1177/1073191119860910

¹⁸ [Covid-19 | Understanding Society](#). Understanding Society is the name given to the survey of the UK Household Longitudinal Study.

¹⁹ The outcomes are: low life satisfaction (score of 4 or lower) and poor mental health (top decile of the HSCL5 mental health scale).

²⁰ These differences diminish in more complex statistical analysis that accounts for background factors and other pandemic pathways.

²¹ Schoon, I., & Heckhausen, J. (2019). Conceptualizing individual agency in the transition from school to work: A socio-ecological developmental perspective. *Adolescent Research Review*, 4(4), 135–148.

²² [Build Back Better: our plan for growth - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth).