



Career Ready? UK Youth during the Covid-19 Crisis.

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The international, large-scale YEAH project addresses the UK's need for robust evidence on the pandemic's consequences for youth employment, learning and wellbeing. Its objective is to examine potential mechanisms to avoid long-term 'scarring' effects for careers and lifetime earnings. Funding for this research is provided by the Economic and Social Research Council, Grant No. ES/V01577X/1.

Website:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/centre-learning-and-life-chances-knowled/covid-19-youth-economic-activity-and-health-monitor-yeah>



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Executive Summary

This briefing presents new evidence regarding young people's career readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining their career expectations and how well their education has prepared them for navigating the transition from education to employment. The findings are based on data collected from a representative sample of young people aged 16 to 25 years during February and May 2021, just before and after the strict lockdown measures ceased to apply.

Our analysis shows that many young people are highly uncertain about their future career pathways during the pandemic. Others remain, however, quite ambitious, with many aiming for degree-level qualifications and a professional career. Most of the young people in our sample acquired career-related competencies and engaged in career-related activities throughout their secondary education, although about one in five did not. The acquisition of job skills through engagement in career-development activities, in turn, is associated with greater career certainty and active job search. However, for current students, the pandemic might have meant fewer opportunities for job skills learning. Strategies for skill recovery after the pandemic should address the learning loss regarding job skills and career-related preparation.

Career Expectations:

- Young people are ambitious, with 58% in our sample aiming for degree-level qualifications and 32% aiming for a professional job.
- There are high levels of uncertainty about future careers during the pandemic, as 45% of the young people in our sample do not know what occupation they can expect by age 30.
- Job and educational expectations are not necessarily aligned (career misalignment). Although 67% of those expected to enter a professional career also expected to obtain a degree-level qualification, one third did not.
- Career uncertainty and alignment vary by socio-demographic background suggesting inequalities in how aware young people are of specific career requirements. This is especially the case for young males, those whose parents have low levels of educational attainment, and those who had received free school meals.

Career Preparation:

- Most young people in our sample acquired some career-related competencies in their formal education, including training in writing a CV, finding information about jobs, and writing a cover letter or personal statement. However, one in five students did not learn any of these competencies in school.

- While in school or college, most of our sample engaged in career-development activities, such as getting careers advice, participating in CV writing or interview workshops, internships, or spells of work experiences. In all, 85% of young people in our sample had engaged in at least one of these activities.
- Differences in engagement with career preparation did not systematically vary across background characteristics such as parental education, gender, ethnicity, or eligibility for free school meals, suggesting that education providers take care that most students receive career preparation.
- However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, those in education experienced a drop in work experience, such as getting access to internships, work placements, or a career-related paid job. Nearly one in five wanted to take up an internship or work experience but could not do so.
- In total, 57% of students thought the pandemic worsened their progress in learning job skills, suggesting that worries about lost job skills learning are justified.

Career Preparation, Expectations and Job Search:

- Young people with exposure to career preparation were less likely to be uncertain about their future careers. They were more likely to express career ambitions that were aligned with their educational expectations.
- Greater engagement in career preparation and lower levels of career uncertainty correlated with active job search among young people not in education, training or work or in precarious jobs.

About the survey

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

The survey, which was undertaken online by Ipsos MORI, sampled 1,542 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 of February and again from 26th April to the 12th of May 2021. 458 participants from wave one continued to participate in the survey for wave two. The remaining sample was refreshed according to quotas set by 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 that 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: confidence intervals are unknown in quota samples. As a rough guide, for a random sample of 1,000, the margin of error would be three 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 July and August 2021, and three subsequent waves are planned over 2021 and 2022. Each survey re-interviews respondents from the previous wave, where consent is given and is refreshed using the same procedures to deliver a constant sample size.

1 Covid-19 and employment prospects for young people

This report is motivated by heightened concern for the employment prospects of young people in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It presents new and timely evidence on the career readiness of young people in times of crisis and how this connects with their hopes and expectations for the future.

Right from the start of the first national lockdown in March of 2020, employment prospects were expected to worsen for young workers.^{1,2} Between spring and autumn 2020, youth unemployment in the UK rose faster than at any point since the 2008 financial crisis, rising to above 13% among 18-24-year-olds compared to about 5% among older workers.³ Moreover, by the end of 2020, about 20% of women and 17% of men aged 16-24 were on furlough, and one in three 18 to 24 years old employee had their pay reduced. There were significant age differences, with those aged 16-17 years old being most affected. The unemployment rate among this age group reached 30%, and the proportions on furlough climbed up to 39% for women and 29% for men.⁴ Although by spring 2021, there has been a fall in unemployment, the number of young people in paid work remains well below pre-pandemic levels.⁵ Even before the pandemic, young people faced an increasingly volatile labour market, characterised by precarious, low-paid, and temporary employment and severe austerity measures introduced following the 2008 Recession.^{6,7}

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to be long lasting, comprising an immediate rise in youth unemployment and long-term 'scarring' of pay and employment prospects for a whole cohort of youth trying to make the transition from education into work. The rise in unemployment would have been considerably more had it not been for a sharp increase in full-time education participation, particularly among those aged 16-18. Yet, the crisis has not just been characterised by young people losing their jobs, but also by recent education leavers struggling to find their first job. Between 2019 and 2020, the unemployment rate among graduates and non-graduates who had left full-time education within the previous year rose by four percentage points each, to 18 and 14 per cent, respectively.¹

As is commonly the case in periods of economic turbulence, as business activity resumes, young people find themselves particularly vulnerable in the search for work. Unemployment among young people is commonly higher than adult unemployment since young people typically compete based on less work experience than their older peers. Even though young people today may have higher level qualifications than their older peers, they generally have fewer

valuable contacts than older workers and weaker job skills.^{1,2} Indeed, one key mechanism through which scarring occurs is the loss of opportunity for young people to acquire job 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 job training that young people receive has been declining for years; but held its ground during the first wave of the pandemic.^{8,9}

The reduction in skill acquisition among young workers runs parallel to threats to education quality and quantity. 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 the future.^{6,9}

Against this background, how do young people perceive their own future careers? What are the qualifications they are aiming for, and what jobs do they expect to do in the medium to long-term? And how do they prepare themselves for reaching their goals? In this report, we explore three main questions:

- i. What are the career expectations of young people in times of economic uncertainty? We will focus on young people's educational and occupational expectations and explore topics such as career certainty, their ambitions, and the alignment of occupational and educational expectations.
- ii. How well has the education system prepared young people to steer their transition into the labour market in times of economic uncertainty? Here we examine the acquisition of career-related competencies in formal education, participation in career development activities, and the state of work experience placements in spring 2021.
- iii. To what extent does participation in school-based career preparation support effective career planning? We examine the relationship of career preparation with career expectations and job search behaviour.

2 Career expectations

The representative sample of young people aged 16-25 in this study reflects the circumstances in which young people found themselves in February and May 2021. Young people were asked what kind of job they expect to have when they are aged 30. Notably, 45% of young people in our sample did not know what job they will have by age 30. Our data suggest that career uncertainty was

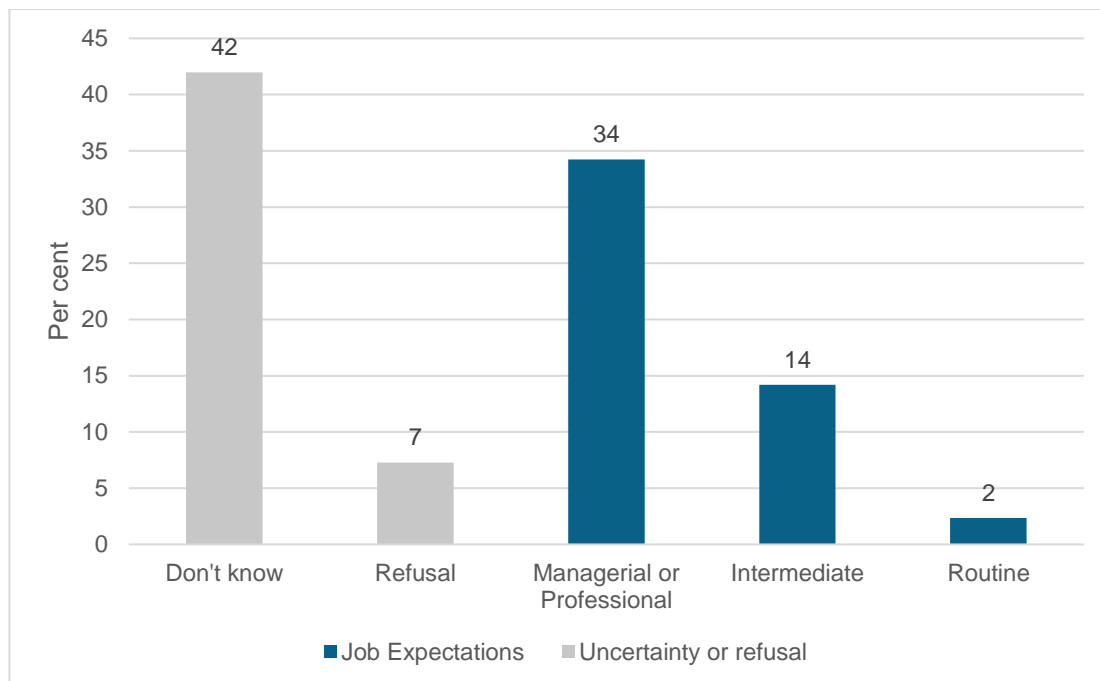
higher among young men than women, among those with less-educated parents, those who had received free school meals while at school, and among those not in employment, education, or training (NEET).

Previous research has shown that career uncertainty is associated with less beneficial adult employment outcomes, even after accounting for individuals' gender, social background, ethnicity, and academic attainment. For example, young people who are uncertain about their future job can expect difficulties in the school-to-work transition, lower wages, and lower lifetime earnings.^{10,11}

Levels of uncertainty in these previous studies were, however, considerably lower than those in our current sample. For example, evidence from the OECD's PISA study suggests that in the UK, the percentage of 15-year-olds who were unable to identify a job that they expected to do by age 30 rose from 5% in 2000 to 24% in 2018.¹⁰ Our assessments were made during the Corona crisis amongst 16-25-year-olds. Potentially, levels of career uncertainty have increased during this time of economic uncertainty and instability. Given that many young people have lost out on their education or are worried about job loss, it might be possible that career uncertainty has increased to such high levels. But it could also be that the high levels of uncertainty are due to the way the survey question was asked. Unlike studies such as PISA, which code expected job titles from open text entries, our respondents had to type in a relevant job title (however vague) and select the best match from the Standard Occupational Classification 2020 job title index.¹²

Figure 1 plots the distribution of job expectations. Most of those who identified a job expect to hold a managerial or professional job by age 30 (34% of the sample), with only a few expecting to be in an intermediate (14%) or routine job (2%). For comparison, about 39% of 29–31-year-olds worked in managerial or professional occupations in the first quarter of 2021, according to estimates from the UK Labour Force Survey (own calculations). This might suggest two things. First, despite the high level of uncertainty, job expectations may be accurate on average, i.e., young people's occupational expectations overall match current labour market demands. Second, if most of those who expect to hold a managerial or professional job by the age of 30 are correct in their prediction, young people who are currently uncertain about their future job may struggle to work their way into limited top jobs.

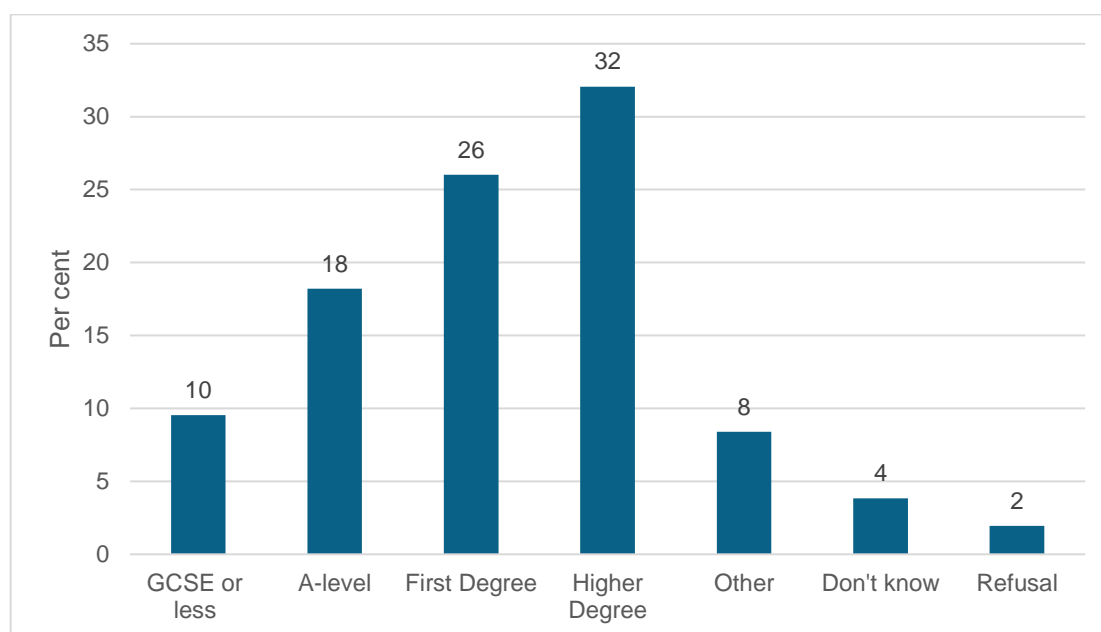
Figure 1: Expected job at age 30 (%).



Target Population: 16-25-year-olds UK residents. Source: YEAH Survey Feb-21, May-21.

Besides job expectations, respondents in our sample were also asked about the highest level of education they expected to complete by age 30 (see Figure 2). Most expected to complete a degree-level qualification (58%), with only few mentioning A-level (18%), GCSE-level (10%), or other (8%). In fact, the relative majority expects to complete postgraduate studies (32%) which is substantially above the 15.5 per cent of higher degree attainment among today's 29-31-year-olds (own estimates based on the UK-LFS). Even if some respondents' expectations are not as accurate as they could have been, the finding suggests that the trend towards higher degrees is unlikely to abate anytime soon. This has potential relevance for universities planners and student funding bodies. Interestingly, only 4% in our sample did not know what level of education they expected to achieve. Those young people are also more likely to be uncertain about their career.

Figure 2: Expected highest level of educational attainment by age 30 (%).



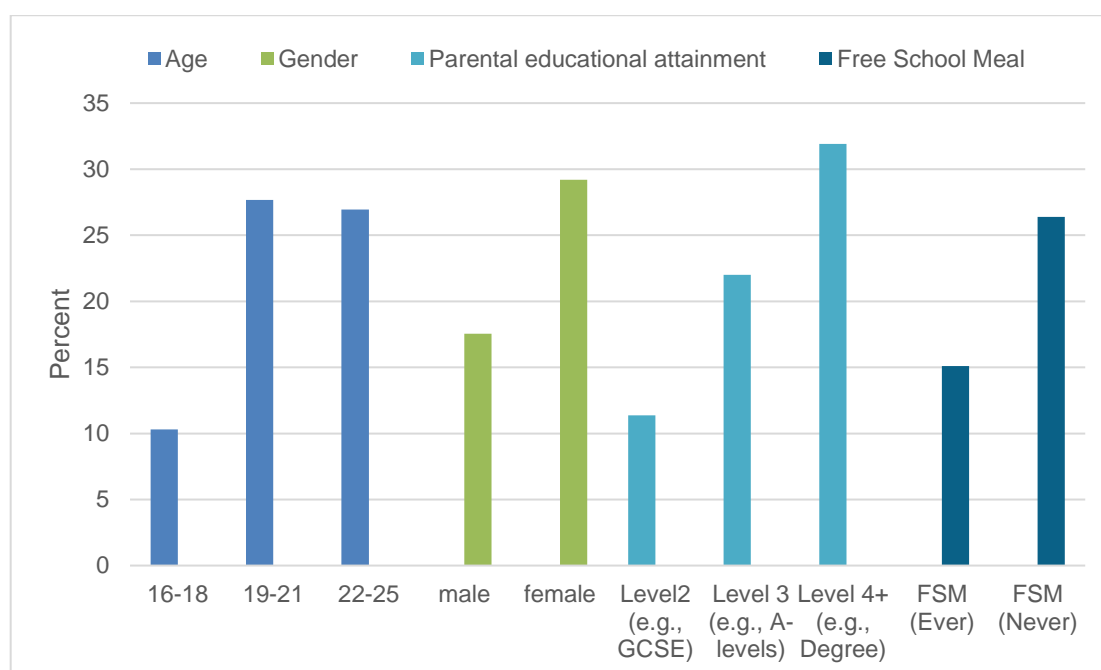
Target Population: 16-25-year-olds UK residents. Source: YEAH Survey, Feb-2021, May-2021.

From the information on expected occupation and educational attainment, we identified different subgroups of young people, including those who show career uncertainty, i.e., those who are not able to name a job they expect to do by age 30. While as any other classification necessarily imperfect, we can identify those with ambitious career goals (career ambition), i.e., those who aim for a professional occupation by age 30. Linking information on expected educational and occupational attainment, it is possible to differentiate between those with professional career expectations who also expect to complete a degree-level qualification (career alignment), and those whose occupational and educational expectations are misaligned, i.e., those who underestimate the required level of education needed to succeed. The group with aligned professional career ambition comprised 23% in the overall sample, and 67% of those who expected a professional job. Those whose professional occupational expectations were not aligned with their educational expectation comprise 11% in the overall sample and about one in three of those who expected a professional job. Misaligned career expectations could be due to different reasons, such as a lack of knowledge about the qualifications required for a professional career, or some degree of over-ambition among those not planning to go to university.

The likelihood for aligned career ambitions differs by individual socio-structural characteristics (Figure 3). Career alignment is higher among those aged 19 or older than among 16–18-year-olds, young women report more frequently aligned career expectations than young men; career alignment changes

sharply by family background measured by parental education and eligibility for free school meals. These socio-structural inequalities point towards important differences in young people preparedness to navigate today's uncertain and increasingly demanding job market. It is especially the less advantaged young people in our sample who struggle to see clear pathways into top jobs.

Figure 3: Aligned career expectations by socio-structural characteristics.



Target Population 16-25-year-olds UK residents. Source: YEAH Survey, Feb-2021, May-2021.

To sum up, young people in our sample express quite ambitious educational and occupational goals. However, there are also high levels of career uncertainty, with 45% of our sample not knowing what job they will have by age 30. Moreover, about one in three of those who expected to work in a professional or managerial career did not expect to complete a degree-level qualification, i.e., they potentially underestimate the level of education required to secure their career goal. Thus, occupational, and educational expectations are not as well aligned as they could be for some young people. Career expectations and alignment vary by socio-demographic background suggesting inequalities in how aware young people are of the requirements for specific careers. This matters, as previous research indicates that career uncertainty and career alignment correlate with adverse outcomes in the labour market, such as low earnings and more time spend unemployed than peers with certain or aligned career goals.

3 Career readiness

Slack labour markets are associated with individual career uncertainty and job insecurity. In the current labour market, individuals must respond to changing demands and increased employment pressures with flexibility, continuous up-and reskilling, and the ability to cope with uncertainty. Those on the cusp of establishing themselves in the labour market must carefully assess their current situation and future possibilities and make decisions about possible steps to foster their career or take a new direction. In such conditions, individuals need to draw on the competencies and resources available to them to seek and pursue the right opportunities to achieve their long-term career aspirations. We thus ask: How well has the education system prepared young people to steer their transition into the labour market in times of economic uncertainty?

This section explores how well education has prepared young people's career-related competencies to search and seize career opportunities and helped them develop their career readiness through careers development activities.

3.1 Career-related competencies

Developing one's career requires not only the skills and knowledge to succeed in a job or in a study programme but also competencies to plan ahead, find and seize opportunities for additional or new paid work, internships or education and training.

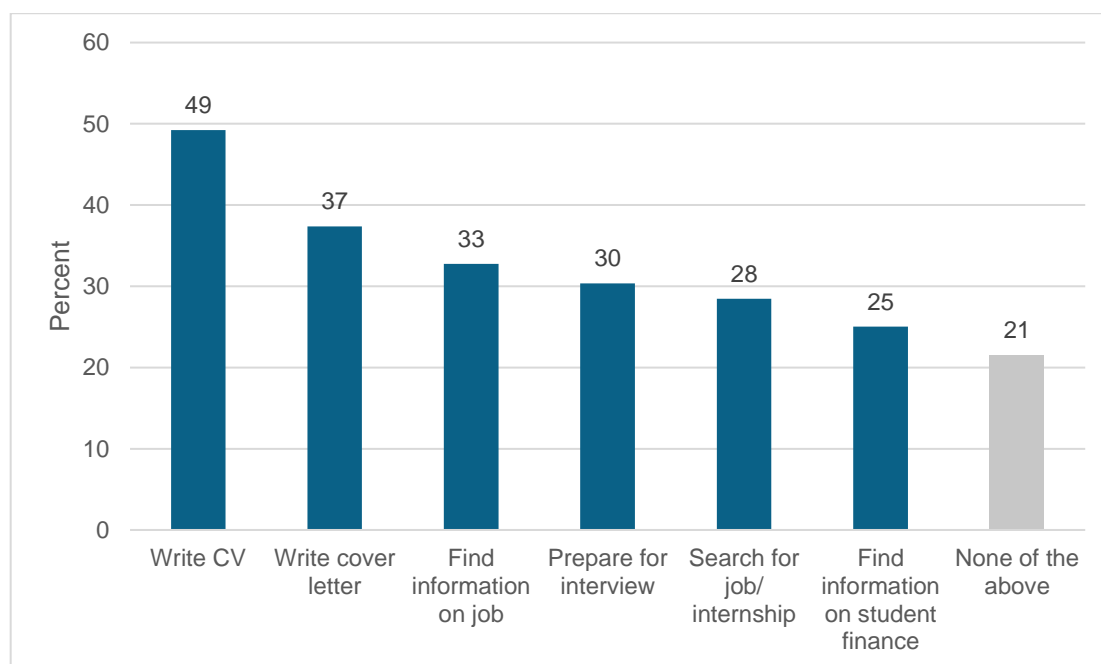
We asked survey participants to indicate what career-related competencies, such as how to find information on jobs and how to prepare for a job interview, they acquired in school, college, or university. Previous research has shown that students in education systems that take a pro-active role in fostering career-related competencies also participate more often in career development activities such as internships or workplace visits.¹³

Figure 4 shows that most young people in our sample had gained some career-related competence in formal education. Nonetheless, one in five had not acquired any of the competencies in school, college, or university.

There are clear differences regarding the specific competencies acquired in education. About half learnt how to write a CV or a summary of their qualifications, followed by competencies on writing a cover letter or personal statement (37 %). Roughly 30% of respondents learnt to find information on jobs or courses, how to prepare for job or admissions interviews and how to search for jobs or internships. Just about 25% were taught to find information on student finance. Given the clear need to understand student loans to make an informed decision about higher education and the associated financial commitments, the latter figure is surprisingly low.

On average, young people had learnt two out of the six listed competencies during formal education. But only about 20 per cent of the sample had comprehensive formal training and acquired three or more career-related competencies in education.

Figure 4 :Career-related competencies taught in school, college, or university (%).



Target Population: 16-25-year-olds UK residents who finished (upper-)secondary education (19+ or <19 and not in education). Source: YEAH Survey, May 2021.

Although there is some inequality in the distribution of career-related competencies taught in formal education, this does not significantly correlate with socioeconomic or demographic characteristics such as parental education, free-school meal eligibility, gender, or ethnicity. Education providers appear to take care that most students can develop career-related competencies. However, there might be a trade-off between acquiring career-related competencies in formal and informal learning settings. Those who left education acquired fewer of the competencies during formal training.

3.2 Career-development activities

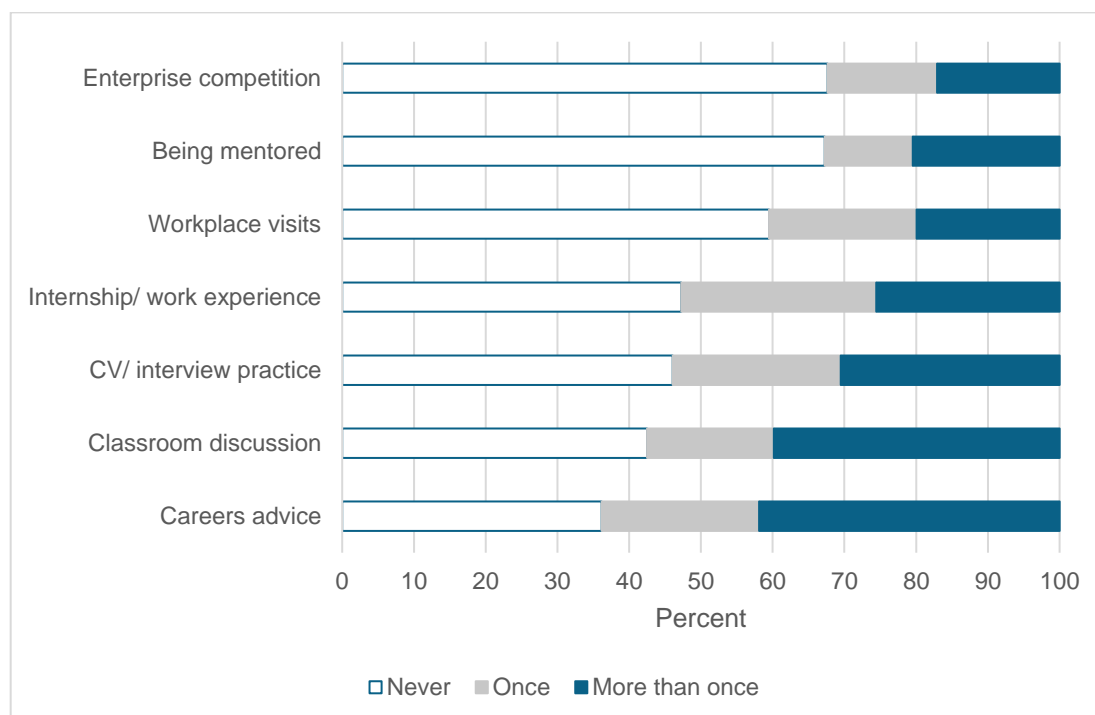
Besides career-related competencies, career-development activities are considered a critical part of careers preparation by enabling young people to understand how current educational effort can align with their occupational goals. Career-development activities organised by schools and colleges with employers or local businesses can ease the transition into work, help negotiate

the increasing uncertainties of today's labour markets, and contribute to the development of fundamental skills. They foster job skills, competencies, and valuable social capital by increasing social and professional networks. Research has shown that engagement in career-development activities can improve, sometimes substantially, individual education and economic outcomes.¹⁴

We asked our respondents to recall how frequently they participated in career-development activities such as internships, career advice or mentorships schemes organised by their school or college with employers or local businesspeople. If they were 19 years and older or between 16 and 18 years and not in education, the survey asked respondents to recall all activities they engaged in between 14 and 19 while in education. 16-18-year-olds who were still in education instead reported the number of activities until the interview. The following analysis concentrates on those who left education to avoid potential confounding from the situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure 5 plots the activities young people had engaged in during (upper-) secondary education.

The most frequent careers-development activities in secondary and upper-secondary education were careers advice and classroom discussions. About 60% of respondents had at least engaged once in either activity. This is closely followed by CV or interview workshops and internships or spells of work experiences (more than half had participated at least once in either activity). By contrast, participation in workplace visits, mentorships and enterprise competition were less common. In all, about 85% of young people had participated at least once in one career-development activity during (upper-) secondary education.

Figure 5: Career-Development Activity in (upper-)Secondary Education (%).



Target Population 16-25-year-olds UK residents who finished (upper-)secondary education (19+ or <19 and not in education). Source: YEAH Survey. Wave 2 (May 2021).

In all, most young people had some form of careers preparation in school, college, or university, but about one in five did not receive this input. The provision does not vary substantially by socioeconomic background or across demographic groups. However, given that a non-negligible minority received little or no preparation to navigate today's job market, there is scope for a more comprehensive approach to career education than is currently the case.

4 Career preparation during the pandemic

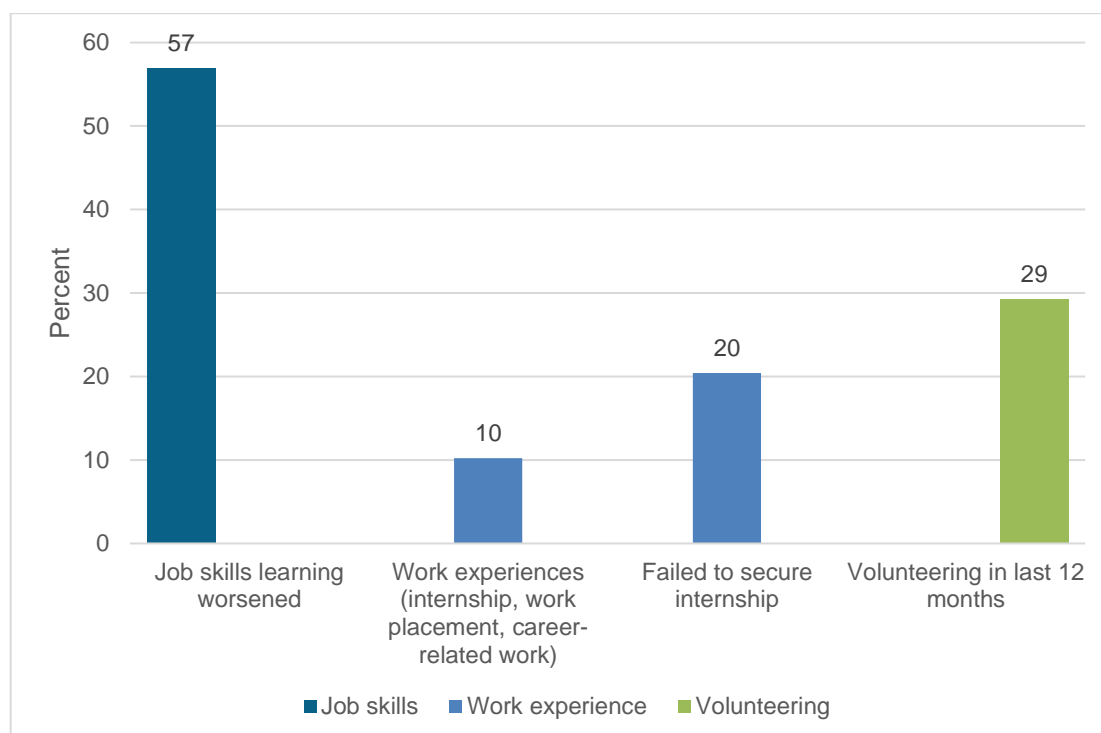
The earlier section shed light on the distribution of career-related competencies and past participation in career development activity. But how has provision held up during the crisis for those currently in education?

Current students might have suffered the triple whammy of lost learning time, a sharp drop in available work experience placements and internships, and a switch to remote work and online learning, which might not have been possible for all organisations. For example, in June 2020, just over three fifths (61%) of employers in Britain who previously offered graduate internships or work

placements had cancelled them.¹⁵ Since then, job vacancies have recovered but remain below their pre-crisis level.¹⁶

We asked young people to self-assess the impact the pandemic has had on their development of job skills, recent participation in internships, work placements and career-related part-time work during studies, and the frequency of volunteering in the last year.

Figure 6: Students' career development during the pandemic (%).



Target Population 16-25-year-olds UK residents who finished (upper-)secondary education (19+ or <19 and not in education). Source: YEAH survey Waves 1 (Feb 2021) and 2 (May 2021).

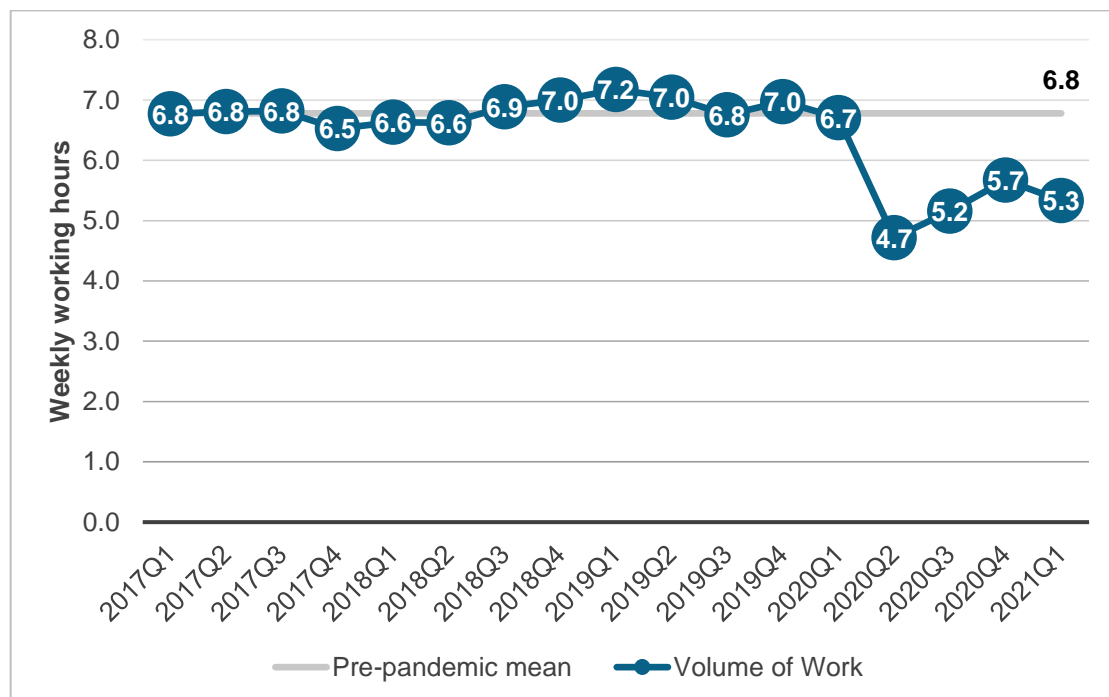
Figure 6 shows that about one in ten students had done some work experience (internship, work placement, or career-related paid job) in their last term. Almost one in three regularly volunteered in the previous year. However, nearly one in five wanted to do an internship or a work experience placement but could not do so. The figure is not far off the 18% of undergraduates who had their work experience placements cancelled or postponed in June 2020.¹⁵ Overall, 57 % of students thought the pandemic worsened their progress in learning job skills.

How does this compare to pre-pandemic trends? To understand what happened to work placements alongside studies over the pandemic, we track the volume of paid working hours among 16- to 25-year-old students using the UK Labour Force Survey until March 2021.

Besides the direct consequences for student income, changes in the volume of work can indicate what happened to work experience opportunities since the first national lockdown in March 2020. While not all paid work will strictly contribute to career readiness, about a quarter of student jobs are directly related to future career aspirations according to our survey of young people. The trend comparison can show how well, if at all, labour market recovery trickles down to students.

Figure 7 depicts the volume of paid work among young people in education or training since 2017. In the years 2017 to 2019, 16–25-year-old in education or training spent on average 6.8 hours per week in paid employment. The figure has dropped significantly since April 2020. With the country in lockdown in the second quarter of 2020, the volume fell to 4.7 hours per week: a decline by 30 per cent. The third and fourth quarter of 2020, when fewer restrictions were in place and the economy and society opened up, saw some recovery, but the volume of work remained below pre-pandemic averages. By the third lockdown in the first quarter of 2021, the volume of paid work among young people in education or training dropped again to about 20 per cent below its pre-pandemic level.

Figure 7: Volume of paid work among 16-25-year-olds in education or training in the UK.



Target Population: 16-25-year-olds UK residents currently in education or training. Source: UK-LFS Q1/2017-Q1/2021. Adjusted for seasonal changes and changes in the socio-demographic sample composition.

Overall, widespread student worries about lost job skills learning seem justified. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, the volume of paid employment among students has remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels. About 20% of students in our sample failed to secure an internship despite wanting to do one in February/May 2021. The current public discussion on how young people can catch up on lost learning concentrates mainly on core academic subjects in primary or secondary education.^{17,18} However, the evidence presented here suggests that for a large percentage of students in (upper-) secondary and tertiary education, progress in job skills learning suffered as well. Given the potentially significant implication of career development activities for education and future economic outcomes, addressing learning loss successfully will require a look beyond the academic core subjects. It needs to include consideration of career preparation activities. Those on the cusp of entering the labour market need support in how to select and find relevant employment opportunities.

5 Relationship of career preparation with career expectations

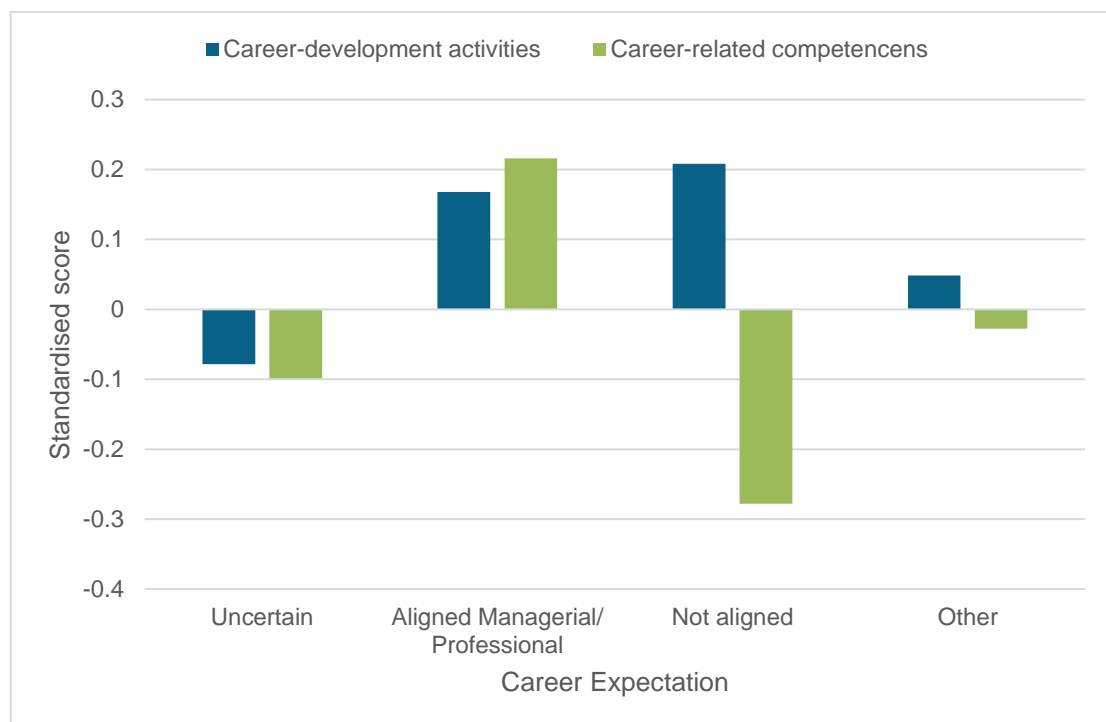
Career preparation is thought to benefit student motivation and attainment.^{10,19} It can provide an understanding of the level of education and training required to reach one's occupational goals, e.g., to secure a professional job. We thus expect there to be a relationship between career expectations of young people and their level of career preparation. Moreover, if career-development activities contribute to valuable work experience, job skills and professional networks, it is conceivable that they also open up access to managerial and professional jobs even without the typically required education credentials. In the UK, about 20 per cent of higher managerial and professional positions in the age group of 29 to 31 years are held by non-graduates, with relatively little change since 2015 (own calculation based on the UK-LFS). It might therefore be possible that career-development activities (unlike career-related competencies) increase the likelihood to expect a professional or managerial job at age 30 irrespectively of whether the individual expects to complete a university degree or not.

Associations between career expectations and career-development activities and competences are shown in Figure 8.ⁱ First, as expected, young people with

ⁱ Because career-related competences and career-development activity are measured on different scales, we first compute standardised scales by subtracting their respective mean before dividing by their standard deviation. The standardised scales have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

uncertain career expectations had acquired below-average career-related competencies and had been exposed to below-average levels of career-development activities in formal education. Second, young people with aligned career expectation had above-average exposure to both dimensions of career preparation. Third, misaligned career expectations are associated with below-average career-related competencies but with above-average levels of career-development activities.

Figure 8: The relationship of career-development activities and career-related competencies with career expectations.



Target Population 16-25-year-olds UK residents who finished (upper-)secondary education (19+ or <19 and not in education). Source: YEAH survey wave 2 (May 2021).

The patterns in Figure 8 are consistent with the assumption that career preparation helps young people improve their understanding of the relationship between educational goals and access to occupational goals. Young people with a higher level of career-related competencies had a lower likelihood to report career uncertainty or misaligned career expectations. Career development activities are also associated with a greater chance to report aligned career expectations. Given that the acquisition of career-related skills was hampered during the pandemic, and that many students expressed worries about the lack of job-skill learning, this is a troubling finding. Moreover, the role and function of career preparation might go beyond a mere information purpose. By offering the opportunity to develop valuable work experience and

job skills, these resources potentially facilitate direct access to managerial and professional jobs even for those without degree qualifications. In other words, while ambitious, a professional or managerial career might be attainable for some not just through higher education but also with appropriate career preparation. However, while this pathway might be available to some young people, it also bears the danger of not being sufficiently qualified to progress in a chosen career. Evidence from previous studies suggests that misaligned career ambitions are generally associated with poorer educational attainment and a more problematic transition into the labour market, characterised by experiences of NEET, employment in lower status jobs and lower earnings.¹⁹

6 Career readiness and job search in the pandemic

The previous sections shed light on career expectation and the current level of career preparation among young people in Britain. But how does career preparation map into individual proactive behaviour during the pandemic? Can career preparation help young people to navigate a slack labour market? If so, career preparation could be an important resource to prepare young people for an uncertain future. It could help young people to steer through the current crisis and transfer to future situations that require a flexible and engaged response.

In the following, we test if aligned career expectations and career preparation correlate with the likelihood to seek new or additional paid jobs among young people trying to establish themselves in the labour market. In other words, do the competences acquired through career preparation enable young people to proactively seek out new opportunities to shape their future in an uncertain job market?

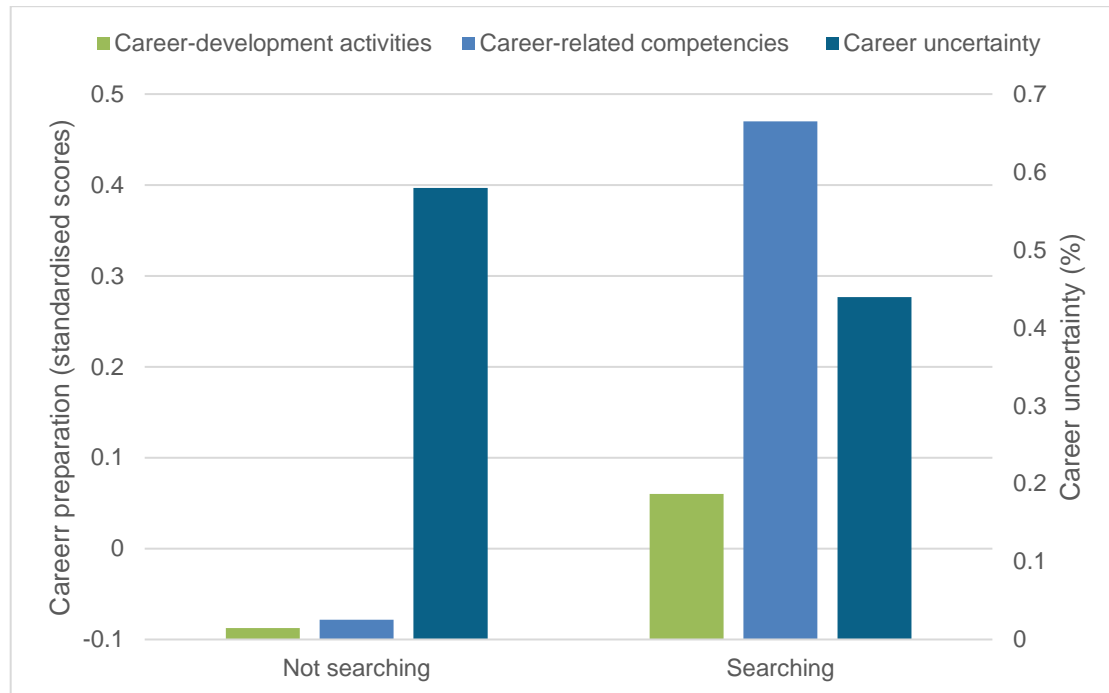
For this analysis, the sample is restricted to 16-25-year-olds who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) or who are in precarious work.ⁱⁱThe analysis focuses on active job search, which means that the respondent applied for at least one position in the last 4 weeks before the survey interview. Job search is an indicator of adaptation behaviour, an action that individuals can take to proactively progress and shape their careers.

Overall, 34 % of young people not in education were actively looking for a new or additional paid job in early May 2021, according to the YEAH survey. This figure rose to 46 % in the sample of young people in NEET or precarious work. Figure 9 shows how past engagement with career-development activities, the

ⁱⁱ In this analysis, precarious work comprises jobs where the employer reduces hours at short notice, internships, or volunteering and other unpaid work.

level of career-related competences, and career uncertainty differ between young people who searched for a job and those that did not. The figure plots past exposure to career-development activity and career-related competences on the left vertical axis, while career uncertainty is projected on the right vertical axis.

Figure 9: Career uncertainty, career preparation and job search among young people in NEET or precarious work.



Target Population: 16-25-year-olds UK residents who were NEET or in precarious work. Source: YEAH survey May-2021.

We find that among young people in NEET or in precarious work, those who actively look for a new or additional paid job had higher levels of career preparation and were less uncertain in their career expectations. If data came from a random sample, the association of prior career-development with job search would be considered statistically significant. The results suggest that career preparation has the potential to enable pro-active behaviour when faced with a difficult situation, such as being NEET. Career preparation can also play a role in facilitating planning one’s career and looking ahead with some degree of confidence. In this sense, career preparation goes beyond reactivity and towards enabling pro-active behaviour in response not just to experienced trauma but to anticipated challenges, tasks, or transitions.

7 Conclusions

The findings highlight potentially raised uncertainties among young people regarding their future careers following the current Covid-19 crisis. Although young people in our sample are quite ambitious regarding their educational goals, with 58% aiming for a degree-level qualification, 45% did not know what job they would have by age 30. Among those who expressed a career goal, a considerable number underestimated the level of education required to secure a professional job, i.e., they express misaligned career expectations. Career uncertainty and career misalignment were higher among males and those from a relative disadvantaged background, suggesting inequalities in how aware young people are of specific career options and the requirements for reaching specific career goals. Our data also suggest that career preparation, particularly the acquisition of career-related competencies, can help young people to become more certain about their career goals, improve their understanding of how to achieve these goals through education and training, and influence their job search behaviour. Career preparation thus does not only matter for current career-related behaviour but also enables longer-term planning and decision making.

Most young people had some form of careers preparation in school, college, or university, yet one in five did not. Education providers take care to include students from across socio-demographic groups. Those who engaged in career preparation were more likely to act and look actively for a new or additional paid job when they found themselves in a situation of labour market uncertainty. Yet, there is scope for a more comprehensive approach to career education and employer engagement than is presently the case. The current stressed labour market has made it harder for students to engage in career development activities. 20% of students in our sample reported that they could not get an internship. The volume of work for young people in education remained below its pre-pandemic average in the first quarter of 2021. In all, 57% of young people were worried that the pandemic worsened their job skills learning. Despite the evident positive effects for education and economic outcomes, loss of job skills learning has received too little attention in the discussions of how to make up for lost learning. Strategies for recovery, to 'build back better', should address not only lost learning concerning academic subjects but also the provision of career-related competencies and activities, enabling students to make informed decisions and choices for their future. Through closer collaboration between education systems and employers, opportunities to develop valuable work experience, job skills and professional networks are achievable.

The survey's findings from the first two waves have been limited in part by the relatively small sample numbers that prevent detailed analyses of how smaller

groups, such as those on a vocational versus an academic track, 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, we can expect that young people's employment chances will improve. However, even if the employment and social environment were to return fully to 'normal' within six months, the effects of the pandemic may be cumulative and long-lasting. Future waves of the survey with partly refreshed samples will keep track of aggregate trends in career readiness and associated economic activities and permit further analyses of the variations in the perceived effects of COVID among young people and between groups according to their social background and their pre-pandemic circumstances.

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Appendix: Descriptive Statistics

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics from the Survey.

Variable	Wave 1 (in %)	Wave 2 (in %)
Age		
16-18	25.3	21.8
19-21	31.6	34.5
22-25	43.1	43.7
Gender		
Male	46.9	47.3
Female	51.4	50.7
In another way	1.7	2.0
Region of residence		
North & Yorkshire	13.5	13.6
Northwest	11.6	11.6
Midlands	17.1	16.1
Southwest & Wales	12.2	11.8
Southeast & Anglia	21.6	21.7
Greater London	14.1	15.6
Scotland	7.4	8.0
Northern Ireland	2.5	1.6
Household income		
<£15k	20.3	22.3
£15k-£55k	53.8	56.2
>55k	25.9	21.5
Household social grade		
Managerial & professional	42.4	42.8
Intermediate	30.9	30.6
Working class	26.7	26.6

Variable	Wave 1 (in %)	Wave 2 (in %)
Current Employment Status		
In Education	43.2	42.1
In Employment	44.9	47.8
NEET	12.0	10.1
Parents' highest qualification		
Below Level 2/Other	12.5	13.8
GCSE or eq.	17	16.7
A levels or eq.	28.7	25.2
Level 4 or above	41.8	44.3
Free School Meal		
No	71.9	69.6
Yes	28.2	30.4
Limiting health condition		
No	75.0	73.3
Yes	25.0	26.7
Ethnicity		
white		76.1
Black, Asian, minority ethnic		23.9
Educational Attainment		
Below Level 2/Other		9.1
GCSE or eq.		21.1
A levels or eq.		36.6
Level 4 or above		33.2
N	1,000	1,000 (including 542 refreshers)