



# 18 MONTHS LOST AND FOUND

Reflections from a transnational participatory  
action research project exploring young people's  
lived experiences of the COVID-19 crisis

MARCH 2022



What makes this project different from typical research is the researchers who are working on it: students aged between 14 and 19! Thanks to the creation of a wide network of young people from four different countries; we are using this opportunity to meet online and discuss a range of topics. For instance, I am now studying how this pandemic has affected the Italian education system.

We know we have undergone difficult times, but today is our day, and I am confident that my peers will shape our lives together with these kinds of actions. Adults are trusting us, even if it is not evident enough! It is increasingly clear that young people need to be involved in decision-making processes, so this may be the occasion to finally start!"

(Male, 17, Italy)



What's up fellow young people? We all have to come together to put our voices out there. From pieces of artwork, cooking, social action projects or talking with our friends and teachers to let them know how we feel and how we can actually improve our schools, homes and areas. Let's get the fire going!"

(Anon, UK)

# CONTENTS

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Growing up under COVID-19: young people's experiences</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>New perspectives on youth participation and active citizenship</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Building back fairer: young people's hopes and aspirations for the future</b> ..	<b>73</b>
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Through the lens of Participatory Action Research (PAR)</b> .....	<b>85</b>
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b> .....	<b>109</b>
<b>Annex One:</b>	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>136</b>
<b>Annex Two:</b>	<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>142</b>



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## Authorship

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## Disclaimer:

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Updated 3 March 2020 11 Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute.

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Growing-up Under COVID-19 was a transnational action research project, which aimed to provide insights to the impact of the public health crisis on young people's lives, and to inform the development of appropriate tools and measures to safeguard children's wellbeing and rights during and beyond the pandemic.

Over 18 months between April 2020 and November 2021, adult researchers from Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield worked collaboratively with 70 young people aged 14-18 living in the UK, Italy, Lebanon and Singapore. The participants were diverse in their backgrounds, identities and circumstances, including LGBTQ+ young people, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) young people, care leavers, young carers, young people with complex health conditions, and young people experiencing mental health problems. All of them brought rich and unique insights to their lives, and to their agency and decision making at a time of crisis.

The project was based on a participatory action research (PAR) design and was carried out entirely online. Young people communicated through virtual groups (panels) of up to 10 participants using video calls and an online collaboration platform, supported by an adult researcher. This work was organised around three 'cycles' of research, each of which involved a combination of individual action research inquiry, activities in the virtual groups, and cross-cultural exchanges between young people from the seven countries. There was a strong emphasis on continuous learning, with findings disseminated throughout.

## About the report

This report was written by the adult researchers, with contributions from young people from the country panels. It aims to draw together and reflect upon the learning from the project, as well as signposting to a wider range of project resources. In what follows, we provide an overview of key themes and messages from the study, foregrounding young people's research and their creative and artistic work. We then go on to examine the role of the PAR within the project and how this shaped the ways in which evidence was produced and analysed. Finally, we present a set of recommendations for three main sets of key stakeholders.

When the project started in April 2020, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were yet to be tested. Since this time, the research evidence base has grown considerably. It is now well established that the crisis has had significant, far-reaching impacts on young people's education (Blaskó & Schnepf, 2021, OECD, 2021), their physical and mental health and wellbeing (Carroll et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Duan et al., 2020; Gadermann et al., 2021), and their family lives and peer relationships (Biroli et al, 2020; Branquinho et al, 2020; Lebow et al, 2020; Cluver et al, 2020). There is also stark evidence that it is often young people with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including from families experiencing poverty or violence and young people with special educational needs and disabilities for whom the effects of the crisis have been felt the most (Crawley et al, 2020; Gupta & Jawanda, 2020; Imran et al, 2020; Rosenthal et al, 2020; Thorisdottir et al, 2021).

As these trends are now well documented, this report does not seek to restate them. Instead, it aims to provide deeper insights to young people's lived experiences. On one level, these experiences reflect young people's observations and concerns about the pandemic as it unfolded and their views on how it was managed. At another level, the learning and reflections from young people evoke a deeper level of questioning about the world they are living in, their status as citizens, the realisation of their own sense of self and agency and their hopes and concerns for the future.

Little attention has been paid to the more nuanced psychosocial impacts on young people in terms of their changing sense of self, coping strategies and personal development, as well as young people's agency and contribution as citizens – for example through activism, digital and political engagement, and community work – and within the family. We used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological systems model for understanding how young people's experiences of the pandemic were mediated by family, community, and national circumstances. The qualitative longitudinal ethnographic action research project, on which this study is based, was designed to engage young people as experts in their own lives (Abebe, 2019; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Lansdown, 2001), including to draw attention to their agency during the pandemic.

## Aim and research questions

The overall aim of the research was:

To understand how young people are experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and to make suggestions for how to promote young people's wellbeing and rights during and after the pandemic.

In achieving this aim, the researchers worked with young people as co-researchers to understand:

- A) How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting young people's everyday lives and those around them, and how are they responding to the situation?
- B) What are young people's perspectives about how the COVID-19 crisis is being managed, how it is talked about in the media, and the measures that are put in place?
- C) To what extent are young people's needs and circumstances being considered, and what is the actual and potential contribution of young people as active citizens?
- D) What do young people think about the attitudes, values, and behaviours of others, and the positive and negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for society?
- E) What do young people perceive as the priorities for the recovery, for rebuilding society and young people's roles in the recovery process?
- F) What messages do young people have for decision makers about managing future crises, and safeguarding young people's rights in the future?

## Research methodology and timetable

The project adopted a longitudinal qualitative research design, working with young people aged 14–19 as co-researchers; ‘learning in action’ through a combination of research and social action activities within their local communities, and combining individual research with group-based participatory inquiry.

Within an over-arching rights-based and whole systems framework (see Annex Two), young people decided how and with whom they documented the COVID-19 crisis. This allowed the possibility for both formal research methods such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and media discourse analysis, and informal diary and arts-based methods. They were supported to participate in project-level analysis and co-reporting, as well as carrying out their own work autonomously, within a robust ethical and safeguarding framework, and working closely in partnership with the adult researcher overseeing their panel.

## Project phasing and tasks

The project started in April 2020, with an initial scoping and development phase, during which time the study team oversaw the necessary ethical clearances and recruitment of young people, working closely with youth NGOs and networks; the establishment of the youth panels, and a period of rapport-building between the adult researchers and young people. This included the development of PAR guidance, tools and training, delivered through the panel structure, and with active participation of young people in setting the agenda.

Following the scoping and development phase, the project involved three main cycles of participative inquiry, each of which tracked the unfolding COVID-19 crisis in real time as this played out within the lives of the young researchers, culminating in a variety of reporting and dissemination outputs:

- **July-October 2020:** The first cycle of PAR tracked the summer 2020 lockdowns through to the autumn school term within the participating countries. Young people progressed their individual research, country panel meetings, and considered the ways in which public authorities and society responded to the emergency. This cycle finished with a set of one-to-one interviews, which were carried out confidentially, coded and analysed for the first interim report: *To Lockdown and Back* (Day et al., 2020).
- **November 2020-June 2021:** The second cycle of PAR was themed 'Research into Action' – young people continued with their individual activities, but with an intensification of the group work as the panels grew in confidence and became more outward looking. This cycle included external collaborations with a theatre company, meetings with public authority figures (including the Mayor of Palermo, and a representative from the Northern Ireland Executive), and guest sessions where the panels engaged with teachers and other professionals. The young people also co-ran a public webinar: [Young People Speak Out](#) in spring. The cycle finished with a set of country update reports.
- **July 2021-November 2021:** The third and final cycle of PAR was mainly dissemination-focussed. Young people finalised their individual research; some panels opted to produce a collective output such as a video, blog or short report, and young people were engaged in planning, writing and reviewing the final report. The adult researchers presented the interim findings at the European Sociological Association conference 2021, and submitted three peer reviewed journal papers, one of which was co-authored with young people based on the use of creative methods within PAR, alongside final report submission.

The table overleaf provides a timeline for the main project reporting outputs and events, with links to where material is available in cases where this is in the public domain.

A fuller account of the research design is provided in Annex Two of this report, while the [research protocol](#) and a young person's guide to the PAR approach are available on the project website: [www.GUC19.com](http://www.GUC19.com).

# OVERVIEW OF KEY PROJECT EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

**APR 2020**

- Research project gets underway.

**MAY 2020**

- Launch of [project website](#), providing an online presence for the study, and a repository for the [40+ research outputs](#) produced by young people.



**OCT 2020**

- Publication of [book chapter](#), detailing the study methodology in *Researching in the Age of COVID-19 Volume II: Care and Resilience* (Policy Press).

**NOV 2020**

- First [interim report and summary](#) published, documenting the period from the start of the pandemic to the end of the first lockdown in autumn 2020.

# OVERVIEW OF KEY PROJECT EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

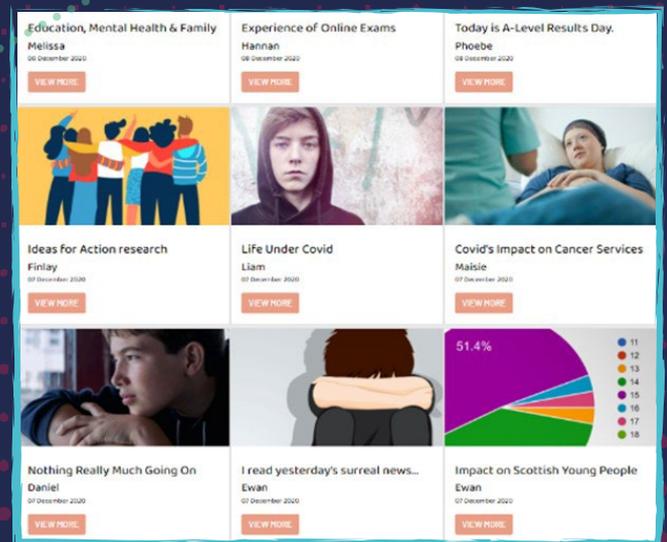
## DEC 2020

- Interview for an [Italian TV channel](#) and newspaper, leading to a role in the online theatre series "Una Stanza tutta per noi" ("A room all to ourselves") organised by the theatre company of the [Teatro Biondo](#) of Palermo. During four episodes, young people isolation and creative expression.



## JAN 2021

- Opinion piece published for [The Conversation](#), *Growing up in lockdown: young people give their perspectives*, by Professor Barry Percy-Smith.
- Co-presentation at the Nuffield Foundation's COVID Realities webinar, and corresponding [blog post](#). Young people presented on how they have used diaries to document the impact of the pandemic on their lives as part of the project.



# OVERVIEW OF KEY PROJECT EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

## FEB 2021

- Youth-led webinar: [Young People Speak Out](#), showcasing findings from the first cycle, attended by 162 participants from 13 countries. The event was co-designed with young people from the project, who also chaired and presented.
- Young people appear on Episode 12 of the #YouthVoice Pioneers Podcast organised by Participation People, discussing lockdown issues peer-to-peer.



## MAR 2021

- Panel contribution at the LSE Festival event ["Digital by Default: the COVID-19 generation"](#), with over 250 attendees, and contributions to the [Blog Post](#) written by Professor Sonia Livingstone. There were (approx. 220 on Zoom, 40 on Facebook).



# OVERVIEW OF KEY PROJECT EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

## MAY 2021

- Participation of youth and adult researchers from the project in the British Academy COVID & childhood workshop, for the [Childhood Policy Programme](#), discussing findings on social relationships, play and creativity during the COVID-19 crisis.

## JUNE 2021

- [Second set of research reports](#) published, covering the period from the second lockdown in autumn 2020 through to summer 2021, with country-specific summaries.



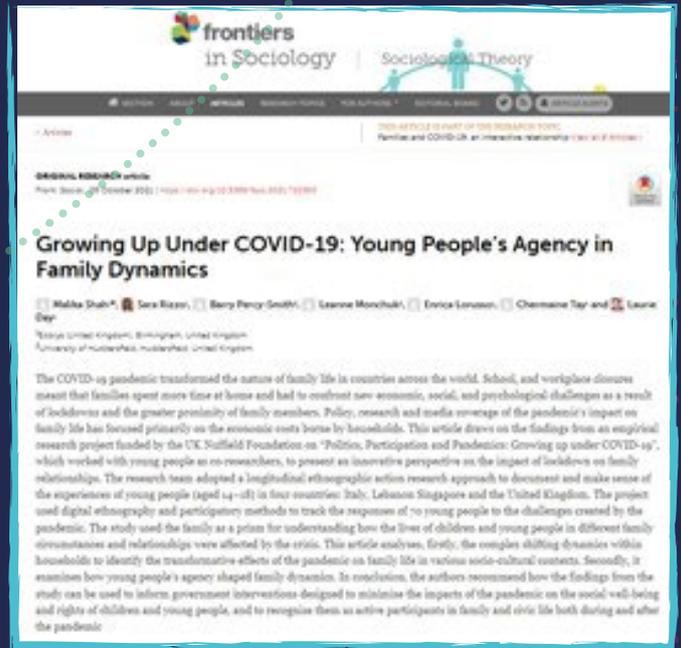
## AUG 2021

- Project team members present two papers at the [European Sociological Association conference 2021 \(Online\)](#): 1) young people's active citizenship during the pandemic, and 2) the impact of COVID-19 on young people's environments.

# OVERVIEW OF KEY PROJECT EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

## SEPT 2021

- Blog post published on the 'Parenting Digital' [LSE blog site](#), reflecting on young people's lack of voice during the pandemic and considering the policy implications.



## OCT 2021

- Presentation of the project at a conference organised by the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Network on [Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values](#), with a focus on lessons learned from the research for citizenship education in Europe.

## NOV 2021

- Research paper published on the subject of: *Families and COVID-19: an Interactive Relationship* as part of a [Special Issue of the Frontiers in Sociology](#) journal.

# 2.0 GROWING UP UNDER COVID-19: YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people's education, their physical and mental health and wellbeing, and their family and social relationships have been the subject of a growing literature, and they are explored within in our previous reports (Day, et. al., 2020a; Shah, et. al. 2021). Across the seven countries within the project, young people talked about being confronted with frustration about the continuing situation, and especially its monotony, loneliness, and the fear of missing out on crucial moments and experiences of their adolescence. They had deeply missed in-person schooling, human contact and the spontaneity of relationships, activities, and life prior to COVID-19 restrictions, and felt they had missed out on events and opportunities they would not be able to get back.

In this section, we highlight recurring concerns that provide insight into the dynamic way young people have experienced and responded to the pandemic. In particular, while we highlight ways in which young people have been affected, we also document the ways in which changes to the structure and rhythm of everyday life have also provided new opportunities.

**UNCERTAINTY AND CONFUSION AS THINGS FALL APART!**

I still remember the day after it was announced that a deadly virus had swept the streets of Wuhan, China. My friends and I went to school with this thought lingering in our minds, yet no one would dare imagine what would unfold in the months to come. We had a dedicated science lesson about COVID-19 where our teachers assured us that nothing bad was going to happen, we'd be ok, everything was under control.

Everything was far from under control.

I went home that day only to find out that my elder sister had had the very same unusual lesson – the only difference being that [her] science teachers had expressed that it looked like a pandemic was on the horizon and that they wouldn't be surprised if their exams were cancelled.

I don't think I've ever felt the way I did in 2020- a weird chaotic feeling that the mechanisms holding our world together were slowly beginning to grind to a stop. The realization that no one was really in control- adults who I'd thought had their lives together were tinged with the same peculiar childish innocence- fear - that seemed to grip all of our lives.

I was terrified and confused and it seemed like everything was falling apart: my family and I were homeless, the steady flow of money from my dad's job was dripping to a close, my elder siblings were working in hospitals with no PPE, our exam grades were now reliant on a postcode lottery system, what if we got COVID? My family and I were living in our own little bubble that felt like it was filling up with water, rising slowly but surely from the ground upwards. I didn't realise I was struggling at the time to cope mentally with everything, but looking back now I was. It's easier to admit this when it's all blown over, when time has passed and a small sense of reality is slowly returning.

'The new normal'- God, don't you just hate that phrase?"

(Female, 17, UK)

### Research diary extract – initial reactions to the onset of the pandemic (UK)

ONCE IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT SCHOOLS WOULD BE CLOSING, A FEELING OF OVERWHELMING ANXIETY FILLED ME UP. I WAS WORRIED ABOUT NOT SEEING MY FRIENDS, MY FAMILY, THEIR HEALTH AND SAFETY, WHAT WAS GOING TO BECOME OF OUR EDUCATION.

WE WERE TOLD IT WOULD ALL BE OVER IN A FEW WEEKS AND THAT WE WOULD BE BACK FOR THE SUMMER TERMS. WE ALMOST KNEW THIS WASN'T TRUE, BUT WE KEPT HOPE WE WOULD ALL SEE EACH OTHER SOON.

SO WE SAID GOODBYE AND PARTED WAYS FOR WHAT WE HOPED WOULD ONLY BE A FEW WEEKS.



HUGGING THE FEW OF MY FRIENDS WHO WERE STILL IN SCHOOL AS WE LEFT THE GATES AT THE END OF THE DAY, NOT HAVING THE CHANCE TO PROPERLY SAY GOODBYE TO THOSE FRIENDS WHO WERE ALREADY IN ISOLATION DUE TO MEDICAL CONDITIONS. IF I HAD KNOWN I WOULDN'T SEE THEM TILL SEPTEMBER I WOULD OF HUGGED THEM TIGHTER AS I ENDED UP MISSING THEM SO MUCH.

I BARELY HAD A CHANCE TO SAY GOODBYE TO TWO OF MY FAVORITE TEACHERS, ONE OF WHICH HAD TAUGHT ME SINCE YEAR 8 (WHEN I WAS 12/13). HAVING TO BRING IN LEAVERS PRESENTS FOR THEM WHEN I HAD TO GIVE BACK TEXTBOOKS IN JULY.



### Video extract - "How COVID-19 has affected my life" (Singapore)

The image shows an Instagram profile for 'tape\_measures' with 1,354 posts, 7,153 followers, and 30 following. The bio identifies the user as a 'Landscape Designer' and lists safety guidelines: 'Do not sit on marked seats', 'Keep at least 1 m apart', and 'Submit photo, location, date'. It also includes a link to 'linktr.ee/tape\_measures'. Below the bio are several circular icons representing different types of safety tape: 'NOT TAPE - STILL MEASURING vol. 2', 'LONG DISTANCE vol. 4', 'MEX TAPE vol. 2', 'NOT TAPE - STILL MEASURING vol. 1', and 'LONG DISTANCE vol. 3'. The main content is a grid of 12 photos showing various safety measures in public spaces, such as marked seats, floor markings, and barriers.

## 2.1 Pros and cons of lockdown: missing out and finding new opportunities

The pandemic intersected with young people's lives across countries in profound and contradictory ways. On the one hand, young people were concerned about a lost period of adolescence, missed education, the potential scarring effects for future education and work as well as deep concerns about political and social injustices unfolding around them. At the same time, young people spoke of unexpected positive changes in their lives concerning their self-care, wellbeing, relationships, and realising new abilities. School closures and homeworking meant that many spent much longer periods of time with family members within the home, which resulted in changes in relationships for the better. These findings concur with other research and relate to greater emotional closeness to family members (Moore et al., 2020), a slower pace of life (Hawke et al., 2020), and realising new abilities (Chawla et al., 2020).

Through their personal experiences and their research, young people became acutely aware that it was their peers with pre-existing vulnerabilities who often faced additional challenges during the pandemic. From LGBTQ+ young people not accepted by family members and cut-off from their support networks to young people living in poverty, those with a disability or complex health conditions, and young people who faced family violence or conflict, the negative consequences of the crisis were also apparent. They related to heightened levels of isolation, depression and anxiety, and to the worsening of mental health conditions, self-harming behaviours, and suicidal ideation (Imran et al., 2020, Hawke et al., and Pacey et al., 2020).

In this section, we examine and unpick these seeming contradictions in young people's lives.

## ONE YOUNG PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT HAS BEEN DIFFERENT ABOUT LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC, AND THE MAIN POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES



### Positives

Positive: I felt with all the free time I had more time for my out of school relationships. I became closer with the friends I had outside of school and with my family because we spent so much more time together.

Positive: A break from study that was only increasing in intensity. I would come home and just study; I'd let a lot of my hobbies fall to one side. Over the lockdown I reawakened my love of art and drawing, I draw so much more now and much more regularly than I did before.

### Negatives

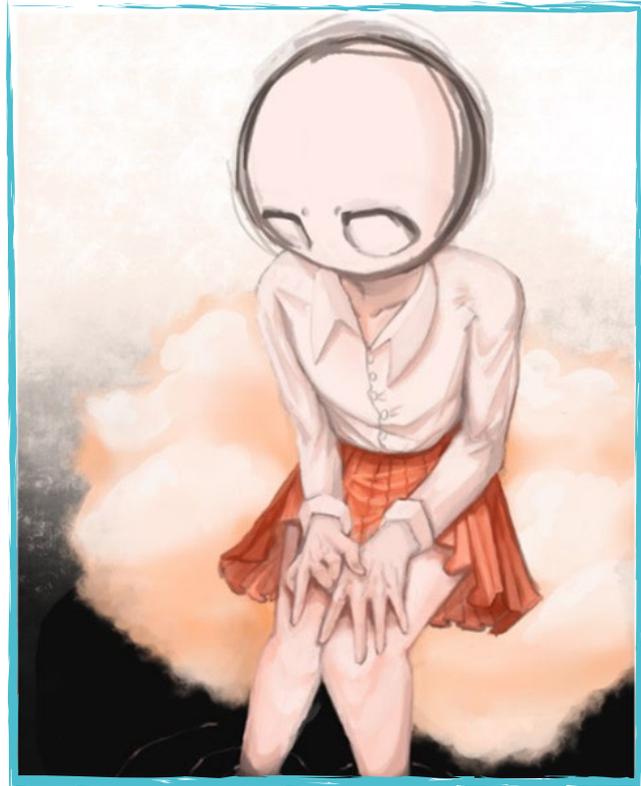
Negative: All the stability I'd had, structured routine was broken down over night. No one knew what the future would hold and making plans was so difficult. When we left school at Christmas last year there were plans for us to return and have exams, but they kept getting delayed. We'd reach the new date and they'd be delayed again. No one wanted to cancel in case they could go ahead but they never did so we were caught in a loop and the work I was doing felt meaningless.

Negative: These are my last years of school where I should be preparing for some independence. We had this big Physics trip we were so excited to go on to Geneva. I had a mission trip I was going on with my youth fellowship to Romania, we were doing team meetings with hand sanitiser sitting in the middle of the room until the first lockdown came in. I feel like I've gone backwards, all these opportunities for experiences I thought I'd have before university never happened."

## 2.1.1 Education

### Navigating uncertainty and anxiety

Schools and exams continued to be a primary source of concern for young people throughout the pandemic. Repeated school closures, the move to online learning, and changes to their assessments were all felt to have impacted young people's education and learning, whilst simultaneously generating anxiety and stress.



“ I've been very stressed and anxious for my exams because we are behind. I don't think the government understands how much strain has been placed on our year especially.”

(Female, 17, England)

“ The superficiality with which the school is treated is the revelation of the lockdown, and its most catastrophic part.”

(Male, 14, Italy)

“ My siblings and I were provided with laptops at the start of the pandemic which was very useful or otherwise we'd have to split our time and organise who got to go to school and when. Virtual learning does not substitute for in person learning, so a national educational catch up is necessary because a lot of young people have missed out on their education. All primary schools should also provide virtual learning. Lots of students at my school felt that the quality of learning decreased during lockdowns due to virtual learning. Lots of young people felt that they couldn't concentrate at home.”

(Female, 17, UK)

Young people across case study countries had very mixed educational experiences, but there was a general consensus that more could have been done to mitigate against the impacts of the second phase of school closures, by learning from the lessons of the initial phase of the pandemic.

### **New opportunities from home-based learning**

Home-based learning has been experienced both positively and negatively with less time spent travelling to and from school and more time for rest, doing other things and interaction with family. Contrary to narratives that this was a lost year, young people argued that, despite difficulties of online learning and excessive screen time, there were opportunities and benefits from the time spent learning at home. These benefits were described in terms of:

- improved capacity for self-study and personalisation of learning,
- stronger online support networks among young people,
- improved digital skills important for future careers.
- schools and teachers adapting and offering greater flexibility
- modernising teaching, making it more engaging through PowerPoint presentations, but problems with lack of technical skills of some teachers
- higher levels of interaction with teachers (e.g. through the chat function)
- learning how to study and manage one's own time independently.

“At school we had never been taught how to use these resources... we were always with pen and paper, writing. Now it's different, now if they asked us to do any autonomous work, we would be able to do that.”

(Female, 17, Italy)

"It gave me a chance to explore some things, I took up essay writing, which I wouldn't have done otherwise. That was good in itself. The experience of it as a novel experience in itself was interesting, I've tried to apply myself to student voice and youth politics."

(Male, 16, UK)

It was considered important that these potential benefits were acknowledged and that there was not simply a return to the pre-COVID situation.

### **Educational inequalities reinforced**

For students with poor access to the internet, with limited space at home, shared equipment, with special educational needs and disabilities, or who lack confidence for self-study, home-based learning was experienced more negatively (Rotas and Cahapay, 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020).

These challenges were apparent in all countries but were experienced particularly acutely by young people in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>, where low levels of infrastructure meant long periods where young people had no access to online learning (Smith, et. al., 2021). In Italy, lack of face-to-face teaching and continual shifting between online and in-person teaching, were seen as especially detrimental. Many young people felt that virtual learning was variable across schools with little awareness of the distractions that some young people had at home. Some students reported difficulties maintaining attention with online engagement, while others were distracted by responsibilities caring for their younger siblings. When some young people had tried to voice their experiences with remote learning they did not always feel that their concerns were taken seriously.

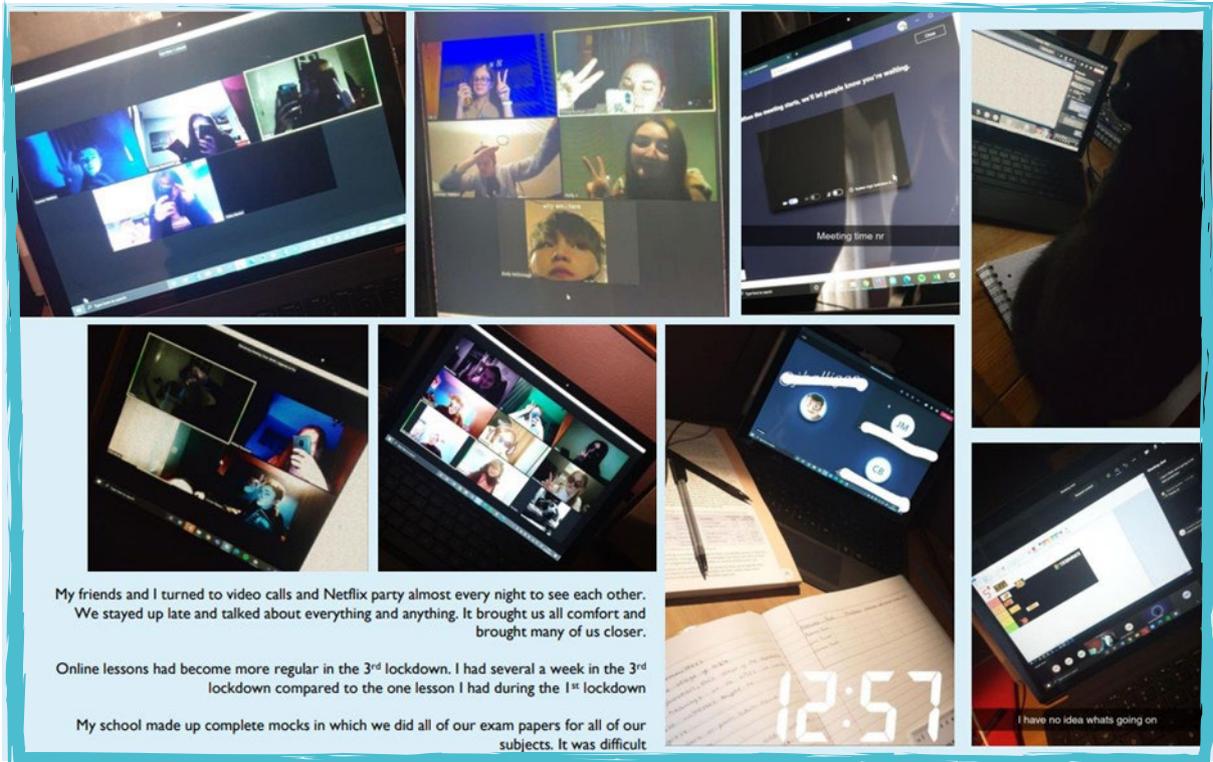
"Our teachers did this ... mass survey to ... 'tell us how it felt and rank us on a scale of 1 to 10'. But then they were like 'oh most of the people enjoyed online learning'. I was like, that is a lie... So I think the schools were overplaying too much how well online learning went and how much young people were actually engaging with it ... all of us are like 'we hated it.'"

(Male, 17, England)

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<sup>1</sup> A report by Save the Children raises concerns about the scale of missed education, with more than 1.2 million children in Lebanon estimated to have been out of school since the start of the pandemic, and concerns that many of them have become school leavers. The report also highlights the acute situation for Syrian children in Lebanon, regarding access to education.

### Research diary extract – “Mock exams and online lessons” (Melissa, UK)



### (Dis)continuities in student-teacher relationships

Young people gave very mixed accounts of professional accountability during the lockdowns. In some cases, teachers and other professionals had been resourceful and pro-active in keeping lines of communication open, and these relationships were a lifeline. In contrast, some young people had found their schools wanting. They spoke of situations where contact with schools had gradually tapered off, or work was set with deadlines that expired without feedback or consequences. These experiences had undermined trust and credibility and gave the impression that adults had absolved themselves of responsibility under the cover of the lockdown.

Nonetheless, it was the positives that stood out when young people recalled the relationships that mattered to them the most.

“What a gem my physics teacher had been throughout the whole thing. He set up a YouTube channel and did little tutorials. It was just him and a piece of paper and he would write on it, and he would explain. He did it so well that we actually got through the first two topics of A2 physics, and they were complicated topics... I understood them almost completely”.

(Female, 17, Northern Ireland)

**OLD HABITS DIE HARD... EXPOSING THE PARTICIPATION GAPS**

Participation under the pandemic has generally suffered. But I think it has partly exacerbated the issues that were already there... Thinking about it from an education perspective in particular, quite often in youth participation or in participation in general, if you don't want to get the same voices and just hear the vocal minority then you need to 'go to' young people. And in this case, that should have meant things like adopting Zoom and other platforms to come to young people and find out what works for them... especially in the case of remote learning. And generally that hasn't happened.

Some organisations have adjusted. I've done various campaigning projects over the lockdown with some organisations that have adjusted well. But for example, my school... flailed about in the dark trying to set up Teams for about a term before they started using it, without ever consulting us. And actually at one point with running our student voice, we went to the teachers, and they just told us that "we don't know what we're doing with home learning, and we don't know what works, and what other teachers are doing". And they could kind of admit that. But there was no concerted effort to get voices from young people, and we had to lead on that.

And I think that's quite often the case with schools in general and many other organisations, whether it be health or youth justice. During the pandemic... it's just revealed how organisations don't come to young people as much as they should."

(Male, 16, England)

### **Returning to school**

Most young people in the UK groups were very pleased to be back at school and able to interact with their friends and felt that returning to school made life feel almost normal, although many found the readjustment to the school environment difficult in ways that had not been anticipated by schools and ministries. The extent of the psychological adjustment was particularly evident. Across the countries in the study, there was nervousness about examinations and learner assessment in the context of having missed substantial periods of face-to-face teaching, with widespread worries about knock-on consequences for further or higher education and future work. However, many of the young people felt that schools were coping with the pandemic much better than the previous year (2020), and that there was greater structure to their education. In Italy, young people felt they should have been consulted about when to return to school and said they should have gone back in January 2021 when they still had six months left of the school year. Instead, this happened in May, when they felt the main purpose of coming back was to allow teachers to test them.

### **Education and work transitions during the crisis**

The ages of young people participating in the project meant that some were starting college or university in autumn 2020, and / or applying for jobs. As with so many other aspects of life during the pandemic, these experiences reflected both disadvantages arising from the COVID-19 restrictions and unanticipated benefits from the rapid shift online and the ability to access information or services digitally. From the frustrations of virtual university campus tours to the flexibility of online job interviews, young people navigated these changing modes of access to services and support in ways that reflected their personal circumstances.



## THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY UNDER COVID RESTRICTIONS (PHOEBE, 19, UK)

April 2021

My experience of the pandemic started off really well.. it started off with me actually having the time to do volunteering and things like that, because I couldn't work [during social restrictions]... so I built-up my experience.

I didn't have to pay to travel to do things in London or Birmingham or Manchester, because I'm not from a major city. I would never have been able to do all the free career development things that I would see online. But I was able to do them, because they were remote, because they were virtual... and that meant that I was able to get my first part time job working and organising a climate conference... I'm doing an internship. I've done loads and loads of things with my university and doing things with people across the country and across the world, that have been incredible... and remote working has meant that I've been able to access things that I would never have been able to access otherwise.

But what it has also done, and what the pandemic as a whole has also done... is disconnect me entirely... I moved out for the first time at 18, and I couldn't go home.. and in that time my parents have had COVID, and I haven't been able to see them. I haven't been able to know how they're doing on a daily basis, because they didn't want to call me, they didn't want to worry me. I have been entirely isolated within my university halls, in which my entire life is here... my relationship is here. My work, my study, my friends...everything I have experienced within my life in the last year has been within this room... and it has felt like a prison.

It has been incredible for me access- wise, but I have never felt so disconnected... There have been a lot of positives, but there have been way more negatives.

## 2.1.2 Personal development and life learning beyond the school curriculum

Whilst some young people had taken a step back, and “waited passively for the pandemic to finish”, many were proactive in using the pandemic as a positive opportunity for self-reflection, reassessing priorities, personal growth and revaluing family life, including appreciating moments of social interaction with family and friends. Young people across panels agreed that COVID-19 had changed them, in terms of “forcing us to redesign our lives and our time, to rewrite our habits”. The pandemic gave everybody “the opportunity to stop and reflect, to think about ourselves and the future.” However, they were also disappointed about how little it took “to regress and return to how we were before”, learning very few lessons from this period.

“2020 in general was a challenge for me and I learned a lot of things .. I thought 2020 would be the year I get everything I want. Now I know 2020 is the year I appreciate everything I have ... I learned when you change your priorities you change your life.”

(Female, 17, Lebanon)

For most young people in advanced economic societies, routines are oriented around education and assumptions that growing up involves doing well in school and acquiring qualifications. Yet, insights from young people in this research highlight the benefits they derived from having the space and time for new ways of being, learning, reflecting, and acting (OECD, 2020), to step back and think about themselves and question their values, identity, relationship with others and role as active citizens. In the first report from this project (Day, et. al. 2020a), we highlighted the way in which personal development and change happened for some of the young people, which we summarise below.

**"I've changed ..."**

Across the board young people reflected on how they had grown in confidence, and they took the opportunity to experiment with different activities without the pressure of other people's opinions:

"I've changed as a person...before I was much more shy, I would get involved with things but not to my full abilities ... looking back, I don't think I had anywhere near as much confidence as I do now."

(Female, 15, UK)

"I've changed a lot, both for the best and the worst on different aspects. I have become more mature, I have changed my opinion on many things, because I had more time to reflect about them and discuss with others. This pandemic has changed my identity and beliefs very much."

(Male, 14, Italy)

Young people spoke of becoming more mature and self-aware. They regretted losing the opportunity to experience key milestone events such as in-person post-exam celebrations, graduation ceremonies and school trips. However, they simultaneously recognised the value of learning to cope with a crisis of this magnitude, the psychological strength they gained from it and a sense of perspective about what they felt was important. Above all, young people rejected the narrative that they were primarily victims of the pandemic, with many proving able to pragmatically adapt to changing circumstances.

### Growing and changing against a backdrop of crisis – “life won't wait” (Lara, 18, Lebanon)

August 31 at 04:13 PM

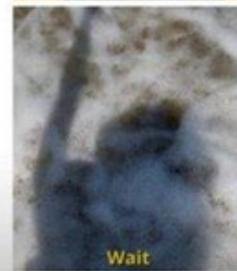
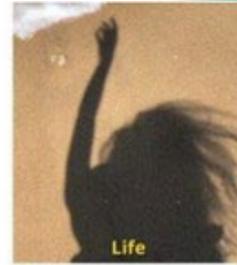
"Life won't wait"

I took this photo during Covid-19.

As you can see there is 3 phases from this wave in seconds and maybe less 📷

We live in a loop, we are born to finish a mission.

We register in a school, high school then university. To start a new level in life which is finding a job and maybe marriage and start a new family. We are racing in this life but I learned to cherish every moment because soon they'll turn into memories ✨



### Visual diary entry - “A year after the first lockdown” (Melissa, 17, UK)

Currently in June of 2021, I am a completely different person to who I was in March 2020, this may be due to the pandemic and the several lockdowns forcing me to reflect on myself and what had been holding me back, being separated from the negative people in my life or just due to getting older and becoming a legal adult and changing as I grow up.

But I can know for certain that the pandemic has changed my outlook on life, the things I used to take for granted such as the ability to hug my friends and family, hold their hand, or even the ability to sit in the same room as them I won't take for granted any more and shall cherish every moment as we don't know what the future has in store. I've realised I can't spend my life dwelling on what could have been or what could be, but should rather live in the moment and enjoy and experience things as they happen, understanding I can't change what has happened but I can change how it affects me and what can be changed in the future, to ensure a happier, healthier world and planet for all. The pandemic allowed for me to connect with people across the globe and fight for what we believe in, and I aim to continue to do so in the future and in my life after the pandemic.



One dimension of personal learning and change for some young people involved more profound questioning of their own values, identity and priorities including, for a couple of young participants, coming out as a gay young person. In other cases change involved rediscovering “what matters in life”, which for some involved valuing and renewing relationships with family members.

For young people in Singapore, observing what was happening around them during the pandemic initiated a process of critical questioning about knowing more about “who we are as Singaporeans” and social responsibilities. However, while the polarising effects of the COVID-19 crisis played out with the first lockdown providing an opportunity for self-reflection for some, for others that was an isolating and traumatic experience.

### **Changing relationships with family and friends**

During the early stages of the pandemic, concerns about the possibility of losing (particularly elderly) family members and mutual support from and with family members brought to the fore an appreciation of family for some. Valuing time with family was reflected in small adjustments to routines that allowed for more time spent together and resulted in greater closeness and mutual appreciation of each other’s relative strengths.

In other cases, however, the pandemic was a source of conflict within the family. This arose where differences in views, values and political orientations were exacerbated by the confinement. In some instances, young people were able to find their voice, and to provide challenge when they needed to:

**“I spent some time with my dad, he has a lot of very far-right beliefs, and I do not share any of those, so I think I’ve become more opinionated and vocal ...and standing up to him.”**

**(Female, 17, Scotland)**

Lockdown was challenging for young people with pre-existing mental health problems and those experiencing family conflict, and it often exacerbated the issues that they already faced. Young people also expressed concerns about people experiencing disadvantage, or peers whom they considered to be at risk of harm while cut off from their support networks. In response to what young people often saw as shortfalls in policy responses to people in need they highlighted the importance of local community action through people volunteering and providing mutual support.

"We have all been banding together and going and supporting .. which is important. Starting to see a lot more of the volunteering stuff come back... community volunteering and helping with young people is a really big thing, a really big community effort to all chip in. I can't think of any specific policy that has affected anything, but just the way that we're all coming back together is quite nice."

(Female, 17, Scotland)

"This family down my road set up tables outside their house where people could drop things off for anyone who needed them. They had first just DVDs, dry food like pasta, rice, then they got books, clothes, and people were leaving things on the table for other people in the community. I was like, that is a really nice thing to do, just to make sure everyone's happy."

(Female, 16, England)

It is in this respect that young people bemoaned how the wider determinants and factors affecting their development are so often overlooked. To that extent, we argue that in the context of children's rights and young people's inclusion as citizens, having the opportunity to develop their own sense of self, develop resilience and evolve their capabilities as autonomous social actors is fundamental to being able to take control of their lives and adapt to change. This more holistic and nuanced perspective on youth focused policy should therefore be central to post pandemic planning. For some this took the form of appreciating family, for others it involved becoming more informed and aware of the world around them.



### Taking it online – changing peer group dynamics

For many, lockdown and social distancing was a time to re-evaluate friendship groups and networks. With schools closed and limited opportunities to meet in person, communication inevitably shifted online. Changing patterns of contact saw a realignment of allegiances, differentiating close friends from school friends, and highlighting meaningful relationships. Whether through gaming, study groups, social media or Zoom quizzes, online platforms assumed a new significance, and a greater intensity than was previously the case:

*“Friends and peers, yes, I think from one point of view, we’ve gotten closer to each other because we’ve learnt more about each other, like stuff that can’t be said face-to-face. We’ve been sharing articles, sharing movies, stuff like that. It’s been a lot more dynamic.”*

*(Female, 16, Singapore)*

*“My real friends, we started to talk a lot, we started to take care of each other’s mental health... we need someone to talk to and we’re not meeting near the schools nor public places. WhatsApp, it’s something good to us.”*

*(Female, 16, Lebanon)*

Abstaining from social media and chat apps during this time posed a heightened risk of missing out, however, and for many young people there was a new online social etiquette and expectations of online availability. Differences in parental mediation meant that not all young people had the same freedoms for online social contact. This contributed towards some feeling left behind by their peers and struggling to participate in gaming or conversations that ran into the early hours of the morning.

The perceived exclusion from friendship groups took on a new dimension without the possibility of face-to-face contact, leaving some young people feeling isolated.

## Day 127 - Monday 27th July @ 11.04pm

I feel like I've been punched in the stomach.

This may be not only the worst day of lockdown, but one of the worst days of my entire life.

So, my friends are all seeing each other tomorrow whilst I'm being left out. I... feel so many emotions I've not felt in months. I thought they were my friends, apparently not.

So, it's short tonight, but for good reason. My friends are leaving me out and I've probably annoyed my best friend.

Please fix this.

Until tomorrow.

### Life learning 'beyond the classroom'

A revelatory aspect of the learning from this project is the extent to which young people benefited from having the time to learn about wider life issues beyond subjects and school curricula. Having time during home-based learning to pursue topics of interest and learn more about what was happening in the world around them proved to be an important opportunity afforded to them by the pandemic.

"Virtual learning has impacted my education negatively, but I have learnt how to study independently, and this has encouraged me to find out more about the things I'm interested in".

(Female, 17, UK)

Specifically, young people had more time and opportunities to delve into topics such as social inequalities (and the extent to which the education of less well-off young people were disproportionately affected by the pandemic), the treatment of marginalised and lesser fortunate groups in society (such as migrant workers in Singapore), structural injustices and racism revealed by the Black Lives Matter movement, climate change and issues concerning leadership, democracy and their own participation as citizens.

"The coronavirus exposed a lot more about our society that we were perhaps not ready or open or even willing to know existed in our communities."

(Female, 16, Singapore)

"I was able to form more opinions... on things that the school doesn't educate you in... about the world around you... If the pandemic didn't happen, I wouldn't know about racism... because of Black Lives Matter. If the pandemic didn't happen, I wouldn't have taken the time to educate myself on what's going on and the oppression that people of colour had to go through."

(Female, 14, Lebanon)

"I always hated politics, but during... lockdown I started following it very actively because I was worried about the situation. I started researching and reading the news online more, as well as TV."

(Female, 18, Italy)

Social learning has been instrumental in activating and reinforcing the importance of young people speaking out, of being heard and of seeing themselves as active citizens able to make an important contribution to society. This was further reinforced in the context of what young people (in the UK and Italy at least) see as ineffective political leadership, lack of accountability and failure to adequately meet their needs.

In Singapore, where young people had a more positive view of political leaders, the focus was on the inequalities existing in the country, linked to the uncovering of poor conditions affecting migrant workers.

"The coronavirus exposed a lot more about our society that we were perhaps not ready or open or even willing to know existed in our communities. Some of the truths really shocked me to my core because I didn't believe that, as progress[ive] as Singapore was, we could [...] make these mistakes".

(Female, 16, Singapore)

**NON-FORMAL LEARNING DURING LOCKDOWN – PEER-LED EDUCATION**

There was this one point where we had, I think this was June or something, there was this thing called The Big Student Call Up. It was kind of like a group of different young people coming together on this call hosted by this organisation called The Pupil Power which is run by this 17-year-old girl, so it's just kind of like different young people joining together to talk about education and why it should change and what should change.

We had discussions on racism in education and how education isn't quite in the best representative way, for example. Geography, for example, the maps aren't fully proportionate, or in history you learn more about European history and stuff like that. So that was quite good because you got to talk to loads of different people that all had a similar view to you... to hear what happens in other places."

(Female, 16, England)

## Opportunities for dialogue

Many young people in the study appreciated the opportunity to discuss with their peers (and adult family members) what was happening around them and their individual experiences. This happened, for example through the meetings organised as part of our projects, as they believed school did not provide them with space for necessary debate. Indeed, many complained about the missed opportunity of using school to discuss the pandemic. According to them, this would have increased young people's understanding of events that were unfolding and their ability to cope with that, offering further opportunities for self-growth and helping to contrast some of the mental health issues that young people experienced.

*"This year, COVID was a taboo. We heard how it affected the school, but no teacher asked us: 'How are you? How are you experiencing it?' The mood of the young would have been better, if these questions had been asked. You couldn't talk about COVID with your family, at school you couldn't talk about it: the school, as part of your educational path, had to talk about COVID...Once again, it was like school was that thing out of this world that doesn't help you in life."*

(Male, 15, Italy)

Young people realised the significance and availability of learning opportunities beyond subject-based curricula and learning cultures of the classroom. Many of them saw the pandemic as an opportunity for developing a more holistic education for life and active citizenship (Bentley, 1998), by developing a greater awareness of social issues such as racism (e.g. Black Lives Matter) and inequalities (Bambra et al., 2020), vulnerability of particular groups (e.g. migrant workers in Singapore), climate change, and society at large.

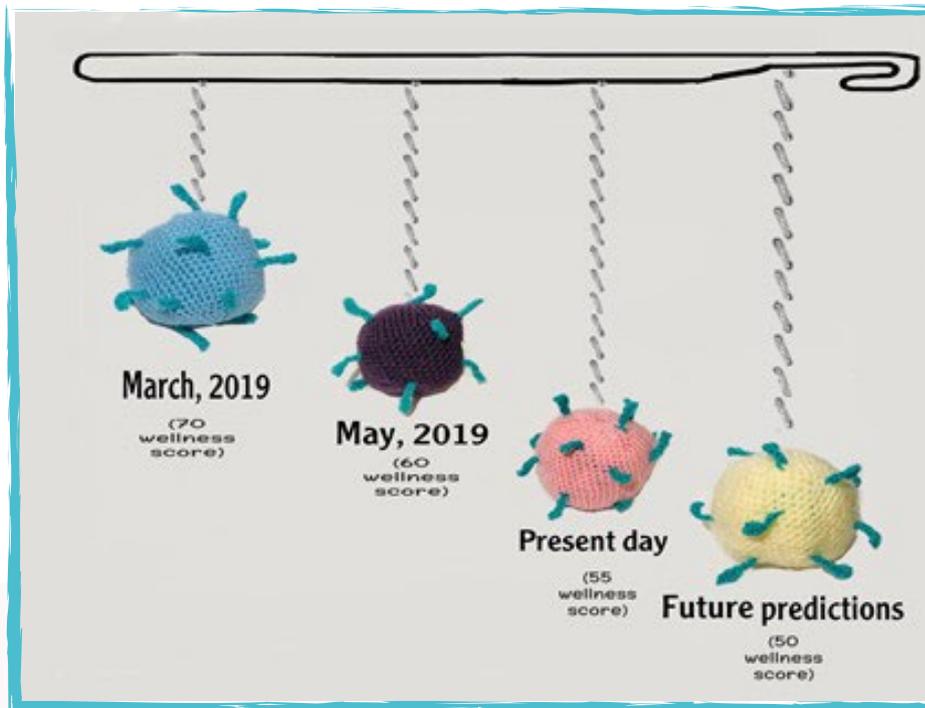
### 2.1.3 Maintaining health and wellbeing

Mental health has been a significant priority issue for young people, exacerbated by the initial impact of the pandemic and further heightened as the pandemic has progressed. The cumulative impacts of multiple lockdowns, the uncertainty and disruption of school closures and changes to exams, social isolation and the lack of professional support, worsened the situation for many. While some young people felt that the first lockdown had helped them build resilience, accounts from others concurred with findings from a Young Minds report (2021), which highlight that subsequent lockdowns have been harder to cope with than the first one. A growing sense of isolation, 'Zoom fatigue' (Bailenson, 2021), the pressures of home learning, and the feeling that they could not see '[a] light at the end of the tunnel', accounted for a growing tiredness, resignation, and pessimism among young people. Young people commonly knew members of their peer group or had directly experienced heightened anxieties relating to body image during lockdown, and they had seen the (re)emergence of eating disorders among their peers while at home.

Where the first lockdown had felt new and provided an opportunity to step back from their busy lives, this was replaced in the second lockdown by a greater sense of stagnation, coupled with disappointment towards prevailing social attitudes and the government response. The novelty of video calls had worn off, and young people felt the loss of social contact to a deeper extent, resulting in deteriorating mental wellbeing for many and anxiety about another school year under lockdown.

“Initially I took this as a quiet quarantine, which took away the stress of the previous period, while it was only the beginning of a terrible psychological fall that I think will teach me a lot. I will always think about this school year.”

(Female, 18, Italy)



Visual representation of results from a survey carried out by young people from the project with their peers in Lebanon.

The survey highlighted the growing levels of fatigue at the persisting crisis situation and uncertainty about the future.

For young people in Lebanon, the disruption to education and to young people’s social lives was compounded by further stress and anxiety as a result of poor digital infrastructure, and the massive impact of the explosion in Beirut. These impacts on young people’s mental health were mirrored in the adult population.

### Documenting the Beirut explosion and its effects – Yammer posts (Lara, 18, Lebanon)

Not a building was in good. But despite everything hundreds of people willingly placed themselves in danger, heat, risk of Covid-19 and other dangers that didn't stop them from cleaning the mess. The mess that we don't deserve, that kills each one of us, if not physically but mentally... Yes, we all have mental health problems, and mental health is as important as physical health.

But people I'm saying this and in my heart there is a lump, never lose hope someday we'll make it a better place because we are the future of tomorrow and together we are stronger.

"When asked if my cup is half-full or half-empty my only response is that I'm thankful for having one"

Pray for Lebanon... Stay positive and safe everyone ❤️



In the UK, young people considered that concerns about mental health had not been taken seriously during the first phase of the pandemic and attainment in school was prioritised over wellbeing. In particular, the difficulties in not being able to go out and meet with friends was noted as having been detrimental to young people's wellbeing. Young people living in university accommodation noted the conflicting pressures to socialise, whilst also bearing the responsibility to isolate and difficulty of living on their own for the first time.

Young people talked about the limitations of mental health support available during the pandemic, with mental health services in general so overwhelmed that they directed people's enquiries to generic, mindfulness-based online resources that proved inadequate for their symptoms.

"Whilst conducting surveys, a lot of my peers stated that they'd been struggling with their mental health. Domestic violence and abuse were highlighted as an area of concern in the area I live in which means more should be done to protect young people. I think the best way to do this is through schools. Not once has my school done a talk on this topic and I honestly think it's so important that all young people are taught about this and informed on where to get help. A lot of people lost loved ones and there didn't seem to be a lot of bereavement support available."

(Female, 16, UK)

Mental health in focus – key themes and messages from one young person's research (Mimi, 16, UK)

# MENTAL HEALTH

**→ OBSESSED WITH WEIGHT**

- \* More time on social media - trends / expectations
- \* NO DISTRACTIONS, JUST ME AND MY MIRROR
- \* New interest in exercise - become obsessed
- \* easier to calorie count / make own meals
- \* easier to skip meals as family routine is lost.

**→ self care**

- \* realised how I neglected self care previously
- \* made bedroom more personal
- \* focused on health + appearance (skincare)
- \* Nails have grown out as not biting from stress

**→ FAMILY**

- \* positive as I kept in touch with family I don't usually
- \* negative as brought out side of my dad I had never seen before

**→ lost personality**

- \* lost socialising skills
- \* worry about reintegrating as feel a disconnection with how people view me

**→ COMMUNICATION**

- \* some people don't thrive communicating through social media so have lost touch
- \* lonely
- \* used to only see some friends in situations that are now not permitted (school, parties)



# HAVING TO GROW UP

- \* suddenly have a lot more responsibilities since my mum got ill
- \* having to constantly look after myself - almost like living on my own
- \* WAS all a shock to the system
  - No more school
  - looking after myself + my own mental health issues
  - ensuring my sister + mum were okay
  - starting a new job
- \* New obligation to stay in touch with people over zoom as "I am not busy" but really I didn't have the headspace
- \* dealing with major family arguments that arose due to close confinement on my own as I couldn't rely on my mum
  - scary as this is when I really felt like a child compared to adult relatives.
- \* lack of support from Gov meant dealing with results confusion on our own, which included choosing A levels (career path)
- \* A worry about how our generation will have to deal with economic recession.

*have a questionnaire for here ready to go out very soon!*

# BODY IMAGE

\* issue I have noticed both in myself and peers so wanted to focus on it.

\* conducted some research on before + after lockdown to see how much it has facilitated it and can compare to my own experience

**BEFORE**



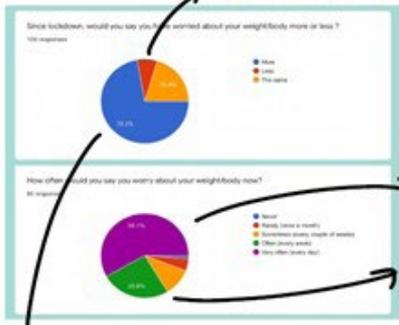
106 responses ↑

quite similar to me, was definitely something I worried about but wasn't as pressing as it was in lockdown.

every week → couple of weeks.

**AFTER**

\* interesting positive: Not at school so I don't feel self-conscious



**EVERY DAY**

→ ED behaviour

→ common reason is that there is too much time to scrutinise body.

\* large majority - worry more

\* NOT at all spoke about by gov?

\* Overlooked issue.

Future risks, government campaign for obesity tackling has me worried

**TIK TOK**

\* many answers on why people worried more surrounded tik tok

\* comparison / trends / calorie counting videos

at the start, this idea that we had to lose weight in lockdown

→ tik tok

→ government

→ social media

→ unaware / ignorant

I set myself a goal that I felt I HAD to reach since I had so much time

Since lockdown, would you say you have experienced eating disorder behaviours more or less? (eg. restrictive eating, binge eating, extreme calorie counting, purging, etc)

108 responses

How often would you say you experience them now?

71 responses

**less**  
\* maybe less able to do as family always around.

**DANGEROUS!**

- \* witnessed first hand in both myself + my best friend
- \* Best friend referred to ED clinic
- \* Doctor said referrals have definitely increased

WANT TO DO AN INTERVIEW BUT FEEL IT IS TOO SOON.

Since lockdown, would you say you have exercised with the sole reason being to change your body more or less?

107 responses

How often would you say you exercise with the sole reason to change your body now?

78 responses

\* Pressure from Gov at start + tackling obesity?  
↓  
Not thinking of their action's consequences

CREATING UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS like ones I saw in myself.

Do you feel your mental health surrounding body image has been effected positively, negatively or not at all by coronavirus/lockdown?

108 responses

\* a nice positive 😊

**FOR ME**

- \* feels happier in my body as I have lost weight but was not healthy so positive + negative
- \* developed a more unhealthy relationship with food/exercise
- \* seems to be the case with many

clear issue

- \* scary that this is normal for our generation.
- \* covered up by congrats on losing weight / 'growing up'

# LOCKDOWN LIFTING + BODY IMAGE.

\* Since lockdown lifted I saw more family/friends and noticed how I started to care less and less about food.

↓ Direct correlation of lockdown vs ED?

- less time to stress about food
- obliged to eat as everyone else is
- happier overall.

**15<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup>**

- \* camping with family/friends
- \* ate dinner every day without thinking
- \* Not worrying about body

**28<sup>th</sup> 31<sup>st</sup>**

- \* worked behind a bar at socially distanced event
- \* worked with friends
- \* Again wasn't worrying at all

lockdown was the cause!

# BACK TO SCHOOL

\* New 6<sup>th</sup> form

\* Pressure to make first impressions but feel I am so behind my true potential due to time off.

\* don't feel my school is making much of an effort to ease us back in

→ straight to work

- \* I have had exams all week in my A level subjects?

\* Not considerate of situation.

**Socially distancing**

- \* Not happening, and the year group bubbles are pointless they get broken so much
- \* worry that now my A levels might get affected by this?
- \* rumours that Y13s aren't reporting symptoms as they don't want to miss more time
- lack of Gov support for students is leading to fear of isolation's consequences for their education.

**MENTAL HEALTH IN RELATION TO KEY EXAMS**

January 2022

My brother took the PSLE [ Primary School Leaving Examination] this past year, and I was generally concerned for him and his peers, students who had to take high pressure exams without being able to freely go out of the house and go back to 'normal'. The pressure of the exams seemed to persist especially since there were ever-changing safe-distancing measures.

With little transparency of these measures for adults, kids his age found it harder to understand why they could not carry out extra-curricular activities that broke the monotony of school and allowed them to communicate more freely outside class. He also mentioned a few of his classmates struggling with their mental health (something that would be expected because of the nature of the examination) but the symptoms he recounted were worrying and highlighted a possible worsening of the issue.

Personally, I saw quite a few of my friends struggle with their mental health last year as well, and I think it may have been because of the fact that some of us were graduating, without having done some of the experiences that were considered a 'rite of passage'. I think it could also have been that my peers and I had been hoping COVID-19 would start to slow down towards the second half of 2021, but that did not happen and the disappointment of that coupled with the unexplained safety measurements made for more anger and sadness. I know a couple of friends who had their major As/Os exams this year and they felt close to burnout by the time they took the exams because of the changes to the curriculum and all of the work they were doing because they couldn't do much else to distract themselves from it.."

(Anoushka, 17, Singapore)

### Managing other long term health conditions

Access difficulties with other forms of medical care also persisted to a considerable degree, as face-to-face appointments resumed against a backdrop of pressures high demand for services. Young people spoke of cancelled non-urgent medical appointments for a range of conditions; reduced contact with clinicians or therapists who they had been seeing on a regular basis before the pandemic, and a shift from face-to-face to online delivery of consultations for ongoing medical care. This was achieved with varying degrees of success. The flexibility suited some, but many were sceptical about the effectiveness of remote diagnosis and treatment.

“When the pandemic struck, everything got moved online, and I really hated it... I could just sit there and say, ‘I’m fine’, and they wouldn’t know any different...”

(Female, 17, Scotland)

“Well, all my appointments were cancelled. I got a call saying, ‘No, you can’t come into the hospital.’ That is when it actually really changed... I was anxious because maybe I wasn’t getting the right prescription, and no one could check.”

(Female, 16, Scotland)

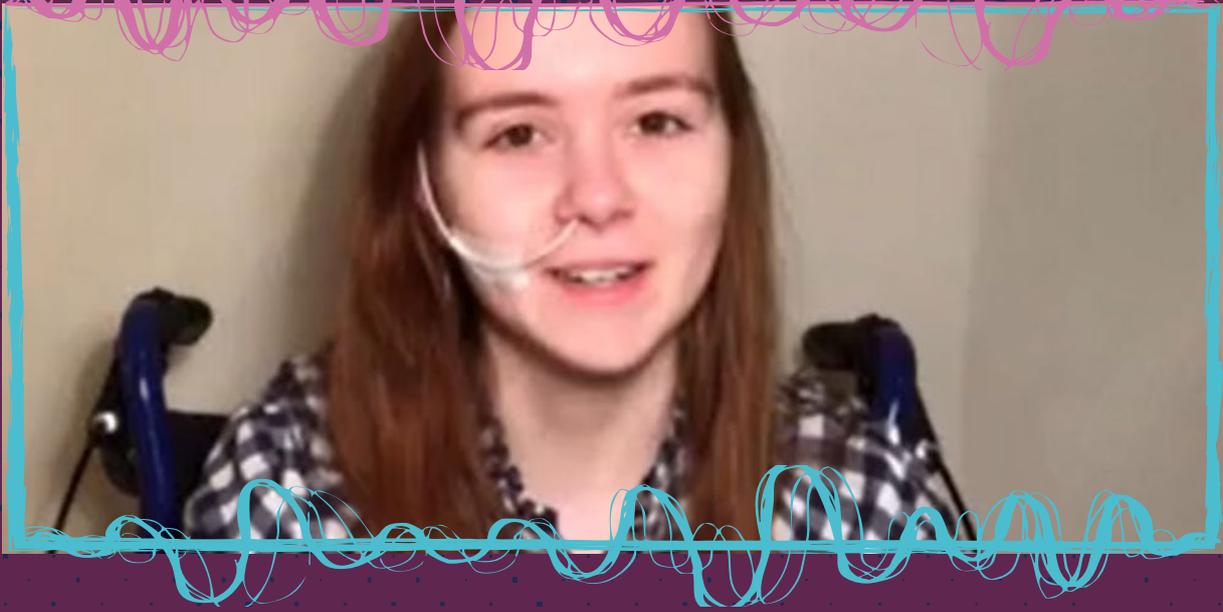
### Self-care and peer support

Young people stressed the importance of listening to one’s own needs, having different coping mechanisms, including ‘collective coping’ (Mariani et al., 2020), and above all thinking about self-care. In the UK, it was felt that maintaining positive health and wellbeing should be embedded throughout the education system beginning in primary school and not just during pandemics.

“My class started a community project to help girls like us get through these times. We would post funny videos on our website, to make everybody happy and optimistic...”

(Female, 14, Singapore)

One way in which some young people dealt with the impacts of lockdown was to turn to arts and creativity as a way of expressing their feelings and experiences, as discussed in the following section.



## **CHANGING EXPERIENCES OF ACCESSING HEALTHCARE DURING A PANDEMIC (FRANCESCA, 16, UK)**

**April 2021**

I think COVID has had both negative and positive impacts for myself personally. I have a number of health conditions, and as someone who misses a lot of school - and I have spoken with other people with other chronic illnesses or mental health problems - being able to attend school virtually from home has been amazing. It's really equalled education for people who can't always attend school. We can engage more with the classroom and the teachers while still being at home.

It's also easier to attend doctor's appointments. Rather than spending an hour on the train, we can just have a Zoom appointment from your living room. And I personally have seen multiple leading doctors in their fields at one time on a Zoom call, which before COVID would never have happened. It was on a Friday at 8pm.. It allowed them to speak together about treatment options... they would never have been able to have that conversation together at the same time.

[But]... It's also been very difficult to get medical appointments because resources are so thin at the moment and having to be in hospital by yourself is quite scary. Even before COVID I was frequently in hospital, but I was always allowed my parents... but now because of COVID, things are done alone... [and] you often forget names of specific medications and doctors you've seen, so it's stressful. But I think it has helped me to grow up and to make me more confident because I have [had] to go through that... so there are positives to everything.

**SELF-MANAGEMENT FOR MENTAL WELLBEING**

Throughout the pandemic, a lot of people (myself included) have found comfort in nature- whether that be during their daily walks, or because they choose to exercise in green spaces, or because it's a place for them to socialise.

All volunteering went virtual. This was a good way to stay connected with friends. A lot of people took up new hobbies to forget about what was going on. I think the lockdowns were beneficial in the sense that they gave you a break from everything and gave you a lot of time to think. I managed to finish the first draft of a novel I'm working on during this time and I wrote two poems.

Not being able to play rugby for so long made me miss it so much and I realised how much playing rugby helps me in terms of my mental health."

(Female, 17, UK)

## 2.2 Strategies for managing the impacts of the pandemic

Common coping mechanisms young people used to distract themselves from the “very realness” of the pandemic helped them to become more resilient in subsequent lockdowns. Young people tried to regain control of their lives through a productive use of time including structured routines, voluntary work, mutual support groups, and creative expression to process feelings, cope and communicate with others. Positive coping strategies included continuing to engage with activities remotely, such as remote training for swimming and dance classes, and scheduling regular online appointments to socialise with friends, to guarantee some form of consistent socialising each week. Many young people appreciated the benefits of regular exercise to cope with so much screen time and being indoors.

“When young people are able to stay in contact with friends, even virtually, it helps remove some of the damage done by that isolation. Currently, the infrastructure is not available for that. Many young people just do not have access. The government did a good job at rolling out laptops, but more could be done to help young people stay in touch with friends online.”

(Female, 18, UK)

“I think that’s how I coped was through talking to friends and distracting myself through playing games and things like that. Just talking, in essence”

(Male, 15, UK)

Young people said they had to teach themselves how to look after their health and wellbeing and pointed out the importance of talking to friends and learning to express their emotions and voice in different ways, such as virtual communication and creative/ social media. Some started to refrain from constantly reading news/updates about COVID-19 within the mainstream press, which was making them anxious. Others resorted to art and imagination (see below) – including finding artistic inspiration in daily objects which characterised their confined lives – to escape the current situation. Young researchers also identified more negative coping strategies such as social withdrawal, either in themselves or their peers. In some cases, young researchers observed peers increasingly drawing on alcohol to cope with the pressures of the pandemic.

## Keeping busy

When the pandemic first hit, and as a response to COVID-19 restrictions forcing them at home, young people often made a conscious choice to use the time that otherwise would be filled with schooling as productively as possible. Keeping busy with tasks and a structured routine helped prevent boredom and frustration and provided them with some sense of control over their lives (Mariani et al., 2020).

Whilst some pursued new leisure activities, others reconnected with existing commitments such as civic responsibilities, for example by “kicking my ‘student voice’ [student council] work back into gear again”. Others found fulfilment in community volunteering, as in Singapore where they supported local migrant workers who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Young people often mentioned the significance of this project and the opportunities it offered to meet on a bi-weekly basis and discuss with peers who were experiencing the same feelings, struggles and emotions.



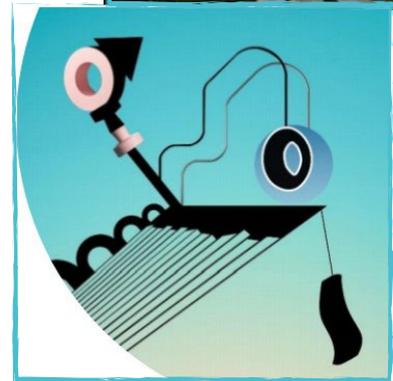
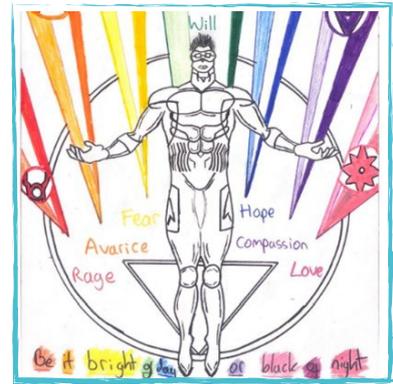
“Even with this project, maybe we would have never had a similar opportunity to gain new skills and better awareness, together with our peers, of how the pandemic is influencing us, the incentive to ask ourselves questions [...] Maybe we will be better able to face a difficult moment, compared to someone who has never gone through similar experiences at such a young age.”

(Male, 18, Italy)

### Unleashing creative potential... as a form of active citizenship

Whilst some young people looked outwards, others turned their focus inwards to creative expression such as visual arts, music, or writing, as art allowed them “to escape the grim reality COVID dumped on their shoulders”. Art provided important means for processing their thoughts and feelings about the crisis - like discomfort with empty public spaces and a sense of helplessness after a year of restrictions, as represented in the artwork below, and reassure themselves about their ability to cope. Some young people used art or poetry to communicate with friends they could not see or used their rooms as stages of intimate theatre pieces.

Young people reported dedicating time to new and existing hobbies or learning new skills such as reading, art, poetry, exercise, painting, reading, writing, humour, embracing their existing or a new faith, experimenting with different forms of technology, joining new online groups, engage in forums and debates and getting involved in youth action projects.



“ Being able to express myself through art has really helped my ability to process the pandemic. If I hadn't been submitting writing and art as part of this researching project, then I wouldn't have had an outlet to express how the pandemic was affecting me. Being able to turn my thoughts and concerns into illustrations in an art form I really enjoy has allowed me to put them to rest, knowing they're out in the world and I don't have to keep perpetuating them in my head anymore”

(Female, 18, UK)

“ I feel as if everyone I know has started weird and wonderful hobbies in order to escape the grim reality of COVID dumped on our shoulders... I started embroidering at the start of the pandemic as a coping mechanism, really because it was nice to take my mind off things”

(Female, 17, UK)

“ It actually really helped me a lot like even like signing up to do research projects and like doing mentoring, it gave me a way of like voicing my opinions and doing things I was interested in and distracting myself from everything that was very difficult in the world”

(Female, 18, UK)

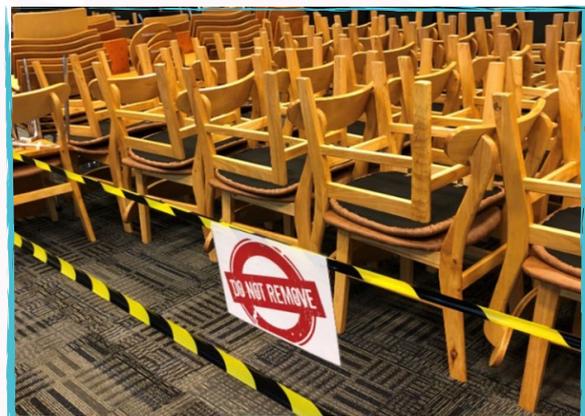


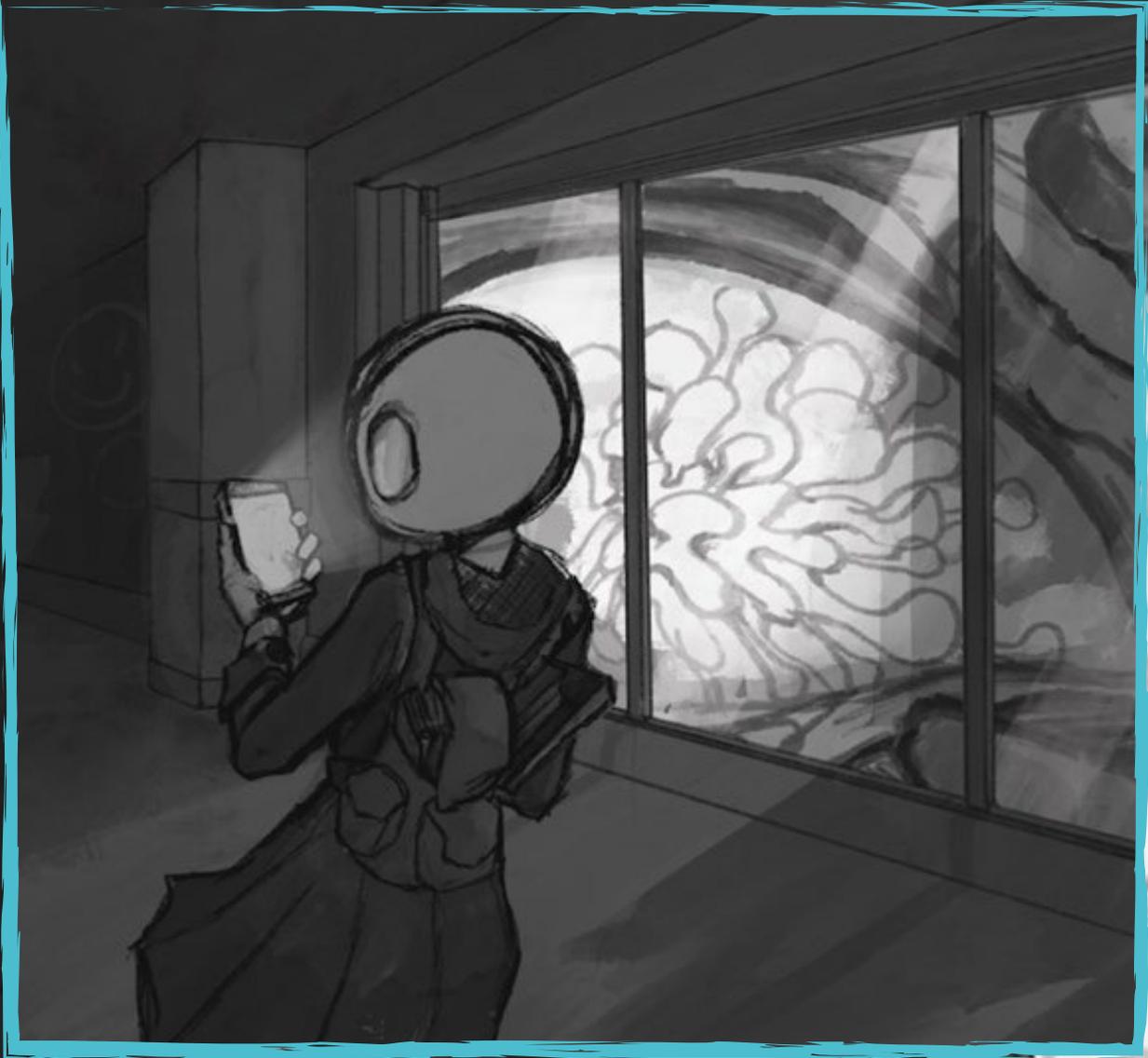
“ I wanted to document this strange time where such diverse markers have turned into a sort of community-driven art project. I believe such documentation is a necessary archive. [...] the way that people have interpreted the safe distancing laws and responded to them has resulted in a beautiful expression of creativity from town councils, restaurants, and even migrant workers”

(Female, 18, UK)

“ I was scrolling through BBC news one day and stumbled across an article about the fact that masks were polluting the environment. I had seen this first-hand as I noticed an increase in littering of disposable facemasks... To show the conflict of interest between saving human lives and the increased disregard for the environment, I decided to embroider on a surgical mask as advocacy tool, for environmental preservation”

(Female, 17, UK)





“ I wanted to create a dark environment with few light sources and a greyscale palette to convey a sinister liminal space... This illustration was the first and drawn much earlier in the pandemic, when many places we used to be so familiar with became empty and strange in this way.

I remember one evening walking outside my door into the street and it was the first time I'd seen the road completely devoid of cars - that sort of strange emptiness with a feeling of something foreboding is why I drew an empty corridor occupied by a lone figure watched by a huge looming eye”

(Female, 18, UK)

“ This illustration] was drawn around January of 2021. The pandemic was approaching a year old, and I wanted to convey a more confrontational mood (in every other illustration the character was much more passive). I drew this during a time I felt really powerless against our whole situation.

My frustration wasn't directed at the restrictions themselves - we had to lock down our cases were surging - but that nearly a year on it felt like nothing had changed and this virus still wasn't going away.”

(Female, 18, UK)



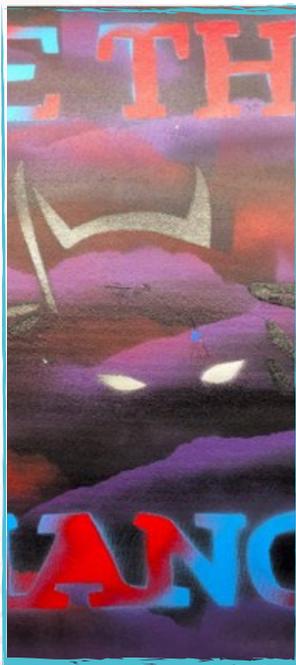


“ The theme behind this was for an outlet for my feelings. Double sided to keep faith that school, personal stuff and volunteering would get better and keeping hopeful. Or to let the darkness take over and cause some chaos which would mean losing me and the people I'd worked so hard to help and the legacy I'm still working to leave... It showed the daily conflict going on and the colours show the rise in power-levels, or for me the power to find my purpose again and someday maybe I can control energy bursts.”

(Male, 18, UK)

“ Many of my drawings talk about me as someone who loves to daydream, but also to shed light on other people's mood. I would like to be as a mirror for them and put curiosity and fantasy to see what's beyond the mirror... Like for this illustration we put a song in the background, and we started drawing and I tried to make her [her friend] express everything she felt.”

(Male 18, Italy)



“ Batman resonated with me at the time and still does because of his will-power. Competing with gods and superpowers and weapons with his skills, a cheeky sum of money and an unbreakable crusade for making a difference. And that's what I needed to be reminded of because COVID really knocked me down a few pegs took me to a dark place. But that crusade to make a difference, whether that's for a nation, a city or yourself will always remain... and it's what drives me every day to give the young people of tomorrow the opportunities I didn't have in the past.”

(Male, 18, UK)

## 2.3 Young people's views on how the pandemic was managed and society's response

Across the UK, Italy and Lebanon, there was widespread dissatisfaction about the way the pandemic was managed. In the UK, many of the young people felt that the lack of a clear strategic plan to deal with the unfolding crisis and the apparent ad hoc approach to decision-making had not inspired confidence when people needed reassurance. For example, the failure to control airports, haphazard adherence to lock down of schools and restaurants, ineffective enforcement of mask wearing, periods of delay in taking decisive action, changes in national guidance, an apparent lack of thinking things through and late communication of key decisions had all contributed towards a sense of uncertainty for young people. This was especially the case in relation to education policy. In the UK, Mock Exams for GCSEs were thought to have been unnecessarily traumatic as a result of having been confirmed, then cancelled shortly afterwards, before being reinstated at short notice and counting towards final grades. Young people fully understood the challenges with managing educational provision in a context of the pandemic, however, they felt that more decisive decision making early on would have been preferable to constant change and uncertainty. Lack of clarity in government decision-making was highlighted by young people as a big cause of distress especially in Italy and the UK.

*"This was particularly highlighted in January [2021 in the UK], when the government caused lots of young people unnecessary distress in their flip-flopping on school closures. Young people on the whole were willing to accept lockdowns to protect the vulnerable but I feel the government's muddled rhetoric regarding the pandemic massively contributed to the discontent amongst young people in the later months of restrictions. It often felt that the needs of young people were being ignored and little was done to mitigate the damage lockdown inflicted on the lives of young people."*

*(Male, 16, UK )*

More broadly young people, particularly in the UK, felt there was too much preoccupation with education alone, at the expense of the wider issues and needs affecting their lives.

In Lebanon, fear, desperation, and delays in responding to the pandemic during the early stages had given way to an emerging sense of dissatisfaction at the public and official response. Discontent with the Lebanese institutions and ruling class among the youth has deep roots and several youth protest movements that existed before the pandemic grew in reaction to the widespread perception that more needed to be done.

The young researchers in Italy also had mixed views on the management of the crisis. Whilst generally agreeing with the harsh lockdown measures at the start of the pandemic, they grew disappointed with the government's management during the second wave of the virus, which they considered too permissive and inconsistent. They also realised how little their concerns and priorities were reflected in post-pandemic recovery plans, causing uncertainty and disruption to their education and wellbeing.

**A GENERATION WEAKENED**

I will never remember my penultimate year of high school with happiness; there have been many reasons that led me to feel insufficient, not ready for the life I would like to live but above all inferior to my peers. What happened to me has totally changed my way of seeing the school, which has now lost all kind of charm. I see it as a war game consisting of five levels, each more complex than the previous one. I am the warrior protagonist of the game who, after having fought a lot, after sustaining serious and deep wounds during the penultimate level, is afraid of what could happen in the last.

The situation in Italy certainly has not helped my psychological situation, because it prevented me from being able to use my time freely. Meeting with friends or on a pizza family night would have been the perfect medicine for me to recover...All this outburst of mine, perhaps even a little excessive, I believe is necessary for it to be possible to understand how this year has weakened the 'generation of the future'...Nobody was able to talk and scream on our behalf, us who have asked for help in a thousand ways without ever be heard. They talk about us as the cause of the destruction of the world, as if we were unable to distinguish right and wrong."

(Female, 17, Italy)

Subsequent decisions to prioritize tourism and commercial activities over safety and education, the slow and patchy rollout of the vaccine and an overall lack of foresight and planning suggested to the young researchers the government in Italy did not hold their needs in high regard. Whilst young people in Italy acknowledged the importance of economic considerations in opening up from lockdown, there were shared concerns that travel policies could increase rates of infection again.

In Singapore, many of the young people were in praise of the government's response to the pandemic including the stringent regulations to prevent the spread of the virus. The gradual approach to coming out of lockdown was appreciated and reflected the government taking account of public views. Young people in Singapore were broadly supportive of the way teachers had managed the shift from home-based learning to in-person teaching.

In the UK, the introduction of a 'road map' out of lockdown with key milestones to aspire towards was generally welcomed in principle, but there were fears that the learning from the pandemic would be lost in the push to get back to normal as soon as possible and to carry on. Young people wanted to see more of a reflective approach, with government held to account on social issues that had been underlined by the crisis – social and health inequalities, the need for climate action, and educational reforms.

### 2.3.1 Feeling marginalised

For young people, their involvement in this research has highlighted the shortcomings of accepted forms of political and social representative democratic participation during the crisis. Many reported that their needs were not sufficiently accounted for during the pandemic, with decisions seemingly based on what was best for the country and economy as a whole, often at the expense of youth.

*"The research we have conducted in our project has shown me the price young people have had to pay is arguably greater than any other generation during the pandemic... losing over a third of their school year, socially isolated from their friends and family and then regarded as being 'careless' about restrictions during this period. I also found how young people's cancer services have been dangerously neglected due to hospital capacity shortages."*

(Female, 18, UK)

These feelings of being marginalised in the political process echoed across other countries. In Lebanon, young people's experiences of the pandemic were exacerbated by wider issues such as the collapsing economy, sectarianism, structural inequalities (refugees, urban/rural divide), a general lack of government accountability and poor investment in infrastructure, including schools, broadband, and public services. These affected young people's lives, for

example as a result of having electricity only for three hours a day. This triggered a strong feeling of frustration among young people, as well as calls for politicisation and youth social action mirroring trends in Egypt where youth disenfranchisement has fuelled the creation of youth-led civic action (Abdou and Skalli, 2017).

### **Disregarding our opinions: exposing a crisis in democracy**

Across countries young people agreed that they had not been consulted enough in the decision-making process, especially on issues and measures that mattered to them.

*"I've ... learnt that we share an annoyance at the disregard of our opinions. Most of us have expressed a similar view of the government's incompetence in handling young people's well-being within the pandemic and agree that things need to change in the future."*

*(Female, 18, UK)*

Young people experienced mixed responses from professionals, with some responding creatively in maintaining provision. In other cases, poor communication reflected a reliance on the discretion of individual professionals (including teachers), with no obvious recourse if this fell short of expectations.

The research highlighted problems with access to services during the pandemic, and lack of accountability of public officials in ensuring young people's rights and entitlements. This underlined how far young people's fundamental rights have been marginalised within the public and political responses to the pandemic. This was most visible in the sacrifices to young people's education in the interests of the greater good of public health, but also apparent with regard to young people's identities, freedom of expression, wellbeing and civic participation. Across the seven countries, young people understood and valued their right to education and were concerned about the decisions taken on their behalf that stood to influence their futures. Of real concern to young people was not just that they felt their needs were not met, but also that their contributions were not included as part of public policy responses.

*"I don't really think, in relation to COVID, I don't think young people have really been involved in any of the major decisions. I'm sure there've been a few panels run by the government to gauge how young people are feeling, but I don't think... COVID policy, has been impacted by young people... I don't really think that the government has thought that much about young people at all, to be honest."*

*(Male, 15, England)*

“The only time I can think of that young people’s voices were actually heard, was when it comes to official exams, the Ministry of Education really wanted official exams... It caused an uproar, because... private schools were able to maintain a decent kind of level of online classes. [But] not a lot of people are in private schools... like we protested on Instagram... the ministry actually heard us and... exams were cancelled. That was the only time they listened.”

(Female, 14, Lebanon)

Young people expressed deep concerns at the lack of young voices in respect of decisions taken and wanted evidence that their governments had a longer-term plan for recovery involving young people. They called for more sophisticated and diverse modes of engagement, including of vulnerable or marginalised youth, while also mobilising on their own terms through direct social action and outreach activities to support marginalised groups in need within their local community.

This project has exposed different traditions and cultures of participation which were apparent from the interactions with young people framed by the socio-political backdrop within their country. In Lebanon, participation often had a more immediate ‘everyday’ resonance, in access to the internet or basic amenities, and longstanding civil rights issues had informed young people’s views on political processes. In Italy, civic participation was somewhat muted, lacking the opportunities for youth voice that have been mainstreamed within the UK. While there were many commonalities in the outcomes that young people hoped to see, these cultural differences became apparent in how young people thought change should be achieved. For some, faced with past experience of not seeing results through formal channels, protest movements and youth entrepreneurship were viewed as the most credible alternatives to mainstream political engagement. A number of the young people had been directly involved in these activities, as we explain further below.

The marginalisation of young people’s needs and voices in the pandemic and the lack of accountability in government decision-making that young people have highlighted in this project echoes concerns elsewhere (see for example: Quilter-Pinner, et. al. 2021) about a crisis in democracy in which economic interests are undermining the extent to which public office of elected officials are representative of the interests of citizens. The following extract from the work of one of the young researchers in Singapore is a powerful example, drawing attention to the dire situation of migrant workers in dormitories during the pandemic.

Reflecting on social injustices – “Here is my COVID-19 experience...” (Anon, Singapore)

# HERE IS MY COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

coming from a privileged perspective, my COVID-19 experience has been inconvenient, at most.

When going out, we wear masks and practice good hygiene, not forgetting to wash our hands frequently. In school, classes are adjusting to a new normal to prevent crowding.

I get to spend more time with my family, who now work from home, and have devoted more time to personal improvement as social gatherings have been limited.

## However, it is clear that it has disproportionately affected people here

Singapore Was a Coronavirus Success Story—  
Until an Outbreak Showed How Vulnerable  
Workers Can Fall Through the Cracks

Surge in Covid cases shows up Singapore's blind spots over migrant workers

Packed dorm rooms spark rare outburst of public debate in city state

**The Disproportionate Effect of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in ASEAN**

**'We're in a prison': Singapore's migrant workers suffer as Covid-19 surges back**

Singapore was lauded for its swift action to suppress infections but crisis has shone spotlight on how it treats marginalised migrants

**Tens of thousands of Singapore's migrant workers are infected. The rest are stuck in their dorms as the country opens up**

Articles from The Financial Times, CNN, The Guardian, The Diplomat, Time

## and so, i believe what is **needed**...

... is leadership that can take on hard truths, even though it may be a tough pill to swallow...

... is a country able to look beyond our bubble to understand the struggles of those less seen...

... a society capable of looking past their differences to overcome a crisis...

... communities who are responsible enough to prioritise health and safety over convenience and ease...

... and people, willing to love and care for one another, willing to use their voice and platform to give aid to marginalised communities, and willing to help our world overcome this crisis.

...where one can live comfortably, while the other continues to live in fear.

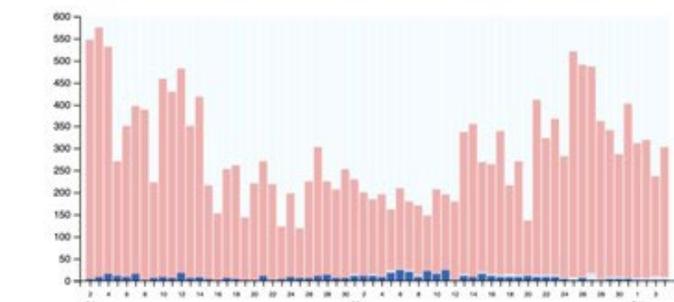
The COVID-19 crisis has pushed the issue in the spotlight. The lives (and livelihoods alike) have been threatened by the crisis, though arguably, it is our migrant workers that bear the brunt of it.

## **WE FACE TWO DIFFERENT REALITIES...**

### SINGAPORE COVID-19 CASES

As of May 20, MOH has updated its definition of community cases to include work permit holders not living in dormitories.

Last updated: Aug 4, 9:50pm



Community Imported  
Dorm residents

### Why blame us: negative media representation

In addition to young people not feeling they were being heard and not having their diverse situations, experiences and struggles sufficiently acknowledged in decision making, many felt that the younger generation were negatively portrayed in the media. This was in stark contrast to their experiences of participating actively in civic and political life through volunteering and youth groups. In addition to the perceived barrage of negative reporting, young people felt that as a generational group, they had continued to be unfairly represented in the media as being responsible for spreading the virus. They made specific reference to the portrayal of young people when they returned to school and how university students were dealt with when in halls of residence.

More broadly concerning the role of the media in the pandemic, young people shared similar views about the volume of negative and sensationalist reporting throughout the pandemic which they felt was counterproductive, stoking fear and panic including negatively impacting on people getting vaccinated.

*"I know lots of people like to paint teenagers as these reckless people who only like to go to dance parties, or whatever the hell, and they're always so reckless ... I feel like they really weren't."*

*(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

*"There was Gavin Williamson's report saying kids aren't disciplined enough, there are just these constant comments saying we are not doing the right thing, we're constantly getting scapegoated."*

*(Female, England, 15)*

As young people became increasingly frustrated by their misrepresentation, there was a corresponding backlash on social media where those in a position of influence were felt to be behaving irresponsibly.



## **A SHIFT IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (TAPIWA, 16, UK)**

**Jan 2021**

This month has been a very, very strange one. With so many people getting the South African strand [the 'Beta' variant, which had been reported in the news at the time], the uncertainty and the chaos has got worse, which has led to a major attitude change in young people.

Because if you look at social media in say, November, so many people were sceptical about the virus... but now it's changed to where more members of the public...are endorsing staying at home and adhering to the regulations.

During this period of uncertainty, more people have become more politically active... especially with all these so-called celebrity influencers going to Dubai and jet-setting to Australia... people are realising how damaging social media can be.



**3.0  
NEW  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON YOUTH  
PARTICIPATION  
AND ACTIVE  
CITIZENSHIP**

For many young people, the pandemic has represented a time of democratic awakening and empowerment, prompting a realisation of the importance of their participation in social and political life. In part this has been due to feeling unheard in decisions concerning COVID, but also as a result of becoming more actively interested in current affairs and the decisions and actions taken by political leaders that impact on them and the people around them. At the same time, this has also given rise to an increased sense of their own agency as social and political actors both in seeking to speak out in more formalised political and public arenas as well as through their own self-initiated social action in their communities and everyday lives.

### 3.1 The pandemic as a driver of political socialisation

Crucially, as mentioned above, COVID-19 restrictions provided young people with more time and opportunity to explore social issues unfolding around them, which the pandemic made more visible. These included climate change, the pervasiveness of racism, entrenched inequalities, discrimination and injustice that caused certain population groups (e.g. low-income groups, disabled and LGBTQ+ young people, migrant workers in Singapore) to suffer way more than others from the pandemic. In becoming more aware about these issues, young people in turn asked questions about their societies and the way decisions are made and the values on which these are based.

Young people welcomed these opportunities, noting the extent to which this type of education does not always happen in this way in school. These insights into the way in which having the space for democratic learning can give rise to increased democratic participation echo Freire's (1970) idea of conscientization, in which (young) people develop a heightened sense of their own political agency through critical reflection on their social environment and the forces that shape it. Regular discussions about the broad pandemic situation and young people's individual experiences of it, resulted in young people developing a better understanding of the social issues surrounding them, discussing these with their peers, and consideration of ways they could become active in speaking out and getting involved in finding ways to respond. Examples included social media and events, writing letters to elected officials or dialogue with political leaders.

An additional reason for the increased sense of agency and interest in youth participation, was the disappointment with how little young people were involved in school decision-making processes; how their needs were often just assumed, rather than discussed and understood by school staff and decision-makers; and how, as a result, measures adopted by schools and governments were deemed inadequate to respond to young people's real needs.

"I think when Government were going to stop free school meals over the summer holidays, it made me feel like the government wasn't focussing that much on young people. I still don't think that they're focussing on young people. They haven't even had a proper consultation."

(Female, 16, England)

"We have just been brushed aside during the lockdown and pandemic."

(Female, 15, UK)

"The school must be the first to hear our cry. It is probably anger that makes me speak this way, but I feel the need to breathe in a peaceful school, not made up of anxiety, grades, tears of disappointment, homework...I don't think all this is necessary. I would like to be able to organize meetings in person to tell my experience [during the pandemic]. With the help of the adult researchers and, fingers crossed, of the school, I would like to address directly those who have transmitted only anguish and fear to me. It is not the school that helped me, it was those 'incapable' of my peers."

(Female, 17, UK)

Driven by this heightened sense of awareness about the political forces that shape their lives and dissatisfaction with ensuing political decision making, many young people have focused their attention on what they can do themselves to have their say and act.

## 3.2 Evolving new ways of doing democracy

In response to dissatisfaction in the way decisions during the pandemic were taken, but also as a result of increased awareness and a realisation of their own capacity for participation and social action, young people pursued a desire to become more active. Attempts to get their voice heard and share their experiences were complemented by demonstrations of new forms of civic action and initiatives in their own communities. For example, by getting involved in volunteering activities and community initiatives to support the elderly and the most vulnerable during the crisis. Believing they were less at risk from the virus, young people felt the urge to contribute to alleviating the hardship that other population groups were experiencing.

"I... wanted to get involved in more things and feel I'm helping in some way. I didn't want to just be sitting around when I know that there are some things I can do. I was volunteering in the village, calling up elderly people whose families are quite far away to check in on them weekly, and just got involved in lots of other projects."

(Female, 18, England)

Indeed, as has been documented elsewhere (e.g. Percy-Smith, 2010), young people are more likely to speak out and articulate their political agency when the issues at stake are more meaningful and relevant to the immediate realities in young people's lives.

"I really like the time I spent volunteering because I really got to understand more about the needs of the people in my community. I get to talk to them or directly and also ... get to talk to the MP ... So I get to hear both the community and ... get some insights on what those people in power ... can do. I found it very meaningful."

(Female, 18, Singapore)

"Sometimes I feel what's more effective is local projects. Like we run the training for our local professionals in children services and stuff, and that often feels like it makes more of a difference than national campaigning."

(Male, 15, England)

Some young people developed their own forms of self-initiated social action, for example through social media, video commentaries, and informal support groups with their peers, to study together or develop collective coping mechanisms. The regular discussions that young researchers held with each other as part of this project also played a role in the development of young people's political agency. These forms of self-initiated participation demonstrate the extent to which youth do not want to be constrained by existing formal processes, instead want to exercise creativity and flexibility in realising a wider array of approaches to speaking out and engaging together with others to enact solutions and bring about change. This included participation in youth cooperatives and networks, many of which had become more active during lockdown.

"I participated to relief efforts in Beirut after the explosion and helped the people who had their homes destroyed... I noticed that a lot of children in our community were showing signs of depression and needed a way to take their minds off the situation. So... we created puppets and wore them while going around with a truck... where we live, playing children songs... and they participated from the windows."

(Female, 16, Lebanon)

### Social action with migrant workers – Singapore



For a long time, there had been an issue of overcrowding and squalid conditions in the dormitories of migrant workers in Singapore. However, the issue had received little attention from the public or Government to improve the situation. When the dormitories became hotspots for the virus, at a time when the rest of Singapore was returning to normal, the poor living conditions were brought to everyone's attention.

To control the clusters of the virus, the Government imposed a strict lockdown on the dormitories. This meant many of the migrant workers were then unable to work or send money home to their families. They were also forced to remain in quarters where it was very difficult to keep apart from other people. Several cases of suicide made the news.

Reflecting on the events, the young people thought that the pandemic had potentially been a positive in this context, as it had provided a catalyst for change. The media coverage had effectively forced action the public to realise the extent of the issue and prompted the Government to think of ways to improve the situation.

A number of the young people from the Singapore panel supported outreach activities, including help food distribution, sending cards and messages of support, and attending the organised events.

**"I think the migrant workers' dormitory issue was a blessing in disguise... COVID-19 opened the eyes of the people to what was happening there. It also motivated government to give a response. They actually acted with the dormitories and there's better living conditions... I was quite impressed."**

(Female, 14, Singapore)

**"I really wouldn't have believed that we were exploiting them, which I think I have come to realise we are... almost horror-like stories began to emerge of how they didn't have money to go back, and they had to send, they gave up on life and passed on because of suicide."**

(Female, 15, Singapore)

### 3.3 The role of digital platforms and social media

Digital and social media have been crucial allies for young people to make their voices heard and foster collective action. Our research resonates with other studies (Cho et al., 2020; Day, et al, 2020b; Kahne et al., 2013; Ito et al., 2019; Wike and Castillo, 2018) concerning the potential role of digital platforms as ways for young people to ‘develop their civic identities and express political stances in creative ways, claiming agency that may not be afforded to them in traditional civic spaces’ (p.3), and facilitate participation in individual or collective actions to improve the well-being of their communities or societies (Pelter, 2020).

#### Maintaining an online presence: young people’s use of social media as an outlet for key messages from the project

Young researchers frequently referred to digital tools and platforms such as Instagram and Twitter as the most effective ways to make information accessible and appealing to their peers, and for taking rapid action by discussing political and social issues online. For example, Lebanese young people resorted to social media to organise and mobilise for their campaigns and protests, and the same was the case in Singapore for volunteering.

“Before I was trying to get involved with as much youth activism as possible and work that I was doing with my youth council. Now, as time has progressed, I’ve found new ways to get involved. Before it was quite structured in the way I was involved, but now... I’ve developed new ways to interact online.”

(Female, 15, UK)

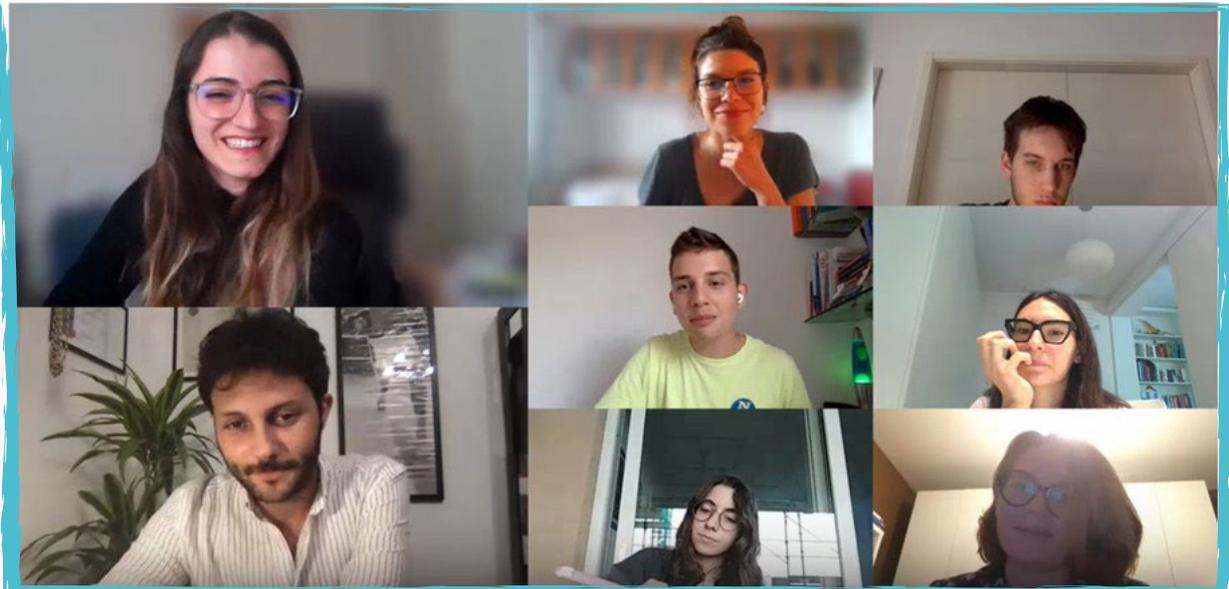


“We’ve done a podcast on Spotify and iCloud and stuff regularly throughout COVID-19, and that’s been our way of getting our voices out, and sent it off to the Children’s Commissioner, and things like that, but it’s quite hard to directly impact, and our way of influencing stuff is - sometimes I feel what’s more effective is local projects. Like we run the training for our local professionals in children services and stuff, and that often feels like it makes more of a difference than national campaigning.”

(Male, 15, England)

To some extent, young people’s use of social media and related politicisation were encouraged through this project, which was conducted entirely online, including young people discussing with each other and communicating findings with practitioners and decision-makers via online workshops, presentations, webinars, and video commentaries. For example, the Deputy Mayor of Palermo – home city of four of the young researchers – joined one of the group discussions held by the Italian panel, to present local measures to respond to the pandemic, answer young people’s questions and hear their feedback and perspectives. On this occasion, young people resorted to Instagram stories to collect additional questions that their friends and peers would have liked to ask the Deputy Mayor, and in turn used Instagram and Twitter to post feedback on and key take-aways from the meeting.

#### Italian young researchers in dialogue with the Mayor of Palermo



Through self-initiated action and getting involved themselves, young people were able to retain a sense of empowerment and self-determination in the face of otherwise feeling marginalised.

### 3.4 W(h)ither democracy?

In the current contemporary era in which powerful and often extreme views are marginalising the voices of different groups in society, there are grounds for concern about increasing threats to democracy. In spite of significant developments in youth participation over past decades, young people, in the UK particularly, lamented the loss of opportunities for participation and having a say for example through youth participation structures. In addition to cries for better hearing the experiences of young people during the pandemic, young people who were more participation experienced talked about the extent to which opportunities they had had to get involved had diminished. To some degree this appears to be the result of lockdown and groups not meeting, yet with communication and meetings moving online, there were concerns that this signified an erosion of opportunities for hearing young voices.

"It's been harder sometimes to get our voice across... I'm part of the COVID-19 pupil forum for my school. I feel like we've been listened to less and less and less, because obviously it's adult decisions, it's adult this, it's adult that. It's kind of ignored from the pupil perspective."

(Male, 14, Scotland)

"I want decision makers to know they have the power to listen to us and together we can make great change, ... but they also have the power to make our voices very, very small. ... Right now, ... young people feel very small. And we should not. ... I just want young people to have a voice and feel ... they can exercise it. Our voices do not need to be louder; they are loud enough to those that choose to listen. Even the quietest ones."

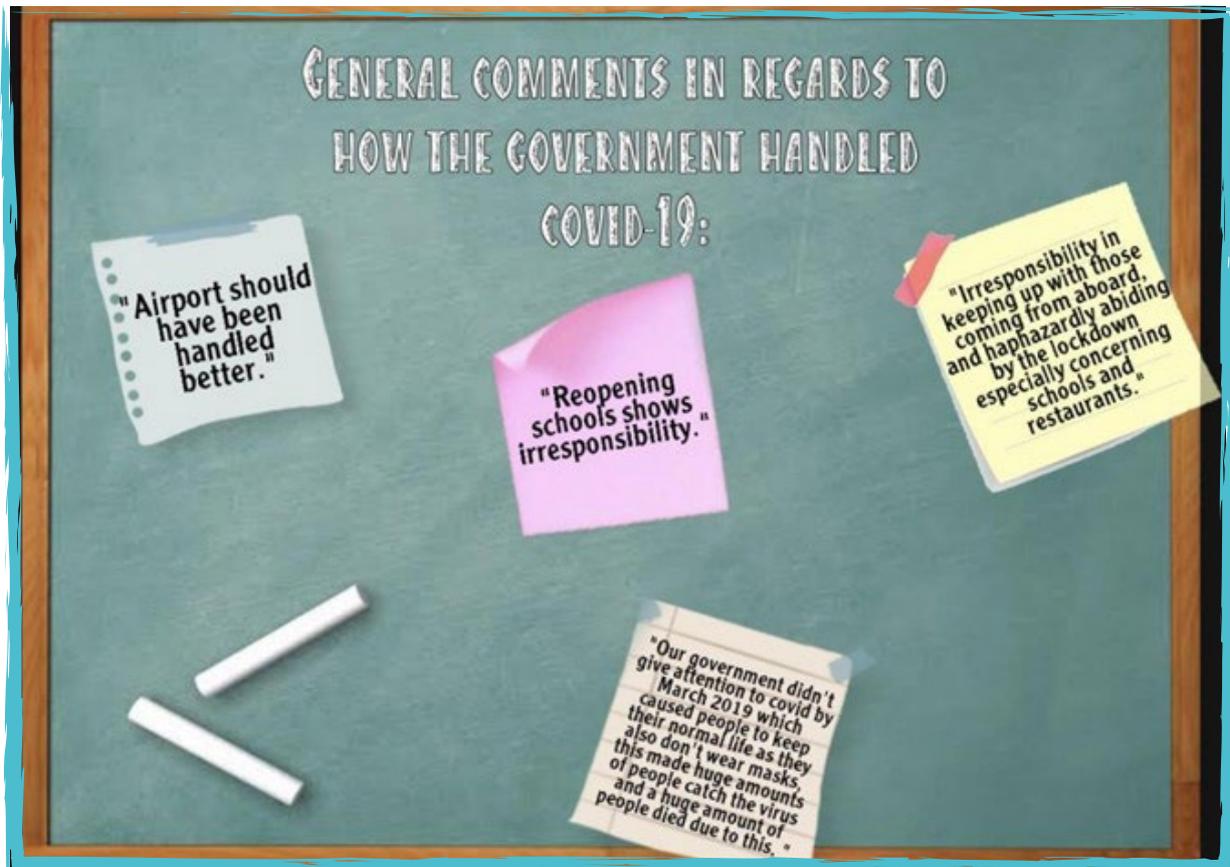
(Female, 16, UK)

This was compounded by increasing concerns amongst young people about the efficacy, and in some cases, moral integrity, of politicians in being accountable to the public by taking the decisions and actions where needed whilst also not seeming to perpetuate double standards.

"I was disgusted to find out that MPs rejected Marcus Rashford's campaign to extend free school meals over the summer .... You'd think that with all the families currently struggling financially ... the government would be more willing to help out. ... it's really beginning to show that all they care about is the economy. ... But on the brighter side, it's lovely to see so many people willing to help out and councils stepping up despite what the government has said.."

(Female, 17, UK)

### Reflections by young people on the management of the crisis (Lebanon)



One of the main obstacles to young people's participation and acknowledging their equal status as fellow citizens, is the legacy of anachronistic views of children and young people as lacking the experience and competence to contribute to decision making. Yet, what has become clear in this project, is the extent to which young people are so often guided by a motivation to act in the public interest with an emphasis on pragmatism, resourcefulness and finding ways to achieve a tangible impact.

"[We]... raised funds for patients who may not have enough money to pay for their healthcare fees... There's this thing called Masks Sewn with Love and a lot of youths have been signing up for it... do some masks for the migrant workers."

(Female, 14, Singapore)

This stood out in stark contrast to the negative and unrepresentative portrayal of young people in the media as being reckless and irresponsible. Moreover, the stance of many young people was to exercise commitment to work together to respond to the crisis for the greater good of everyone, rather than pursuing self-interest. Indeed, in spite of, or perhaps because of, these changing dynamics, the experiences from young people in this study revealed the emergence of new opportunities and spaces for democracy (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007) that are not controlled by politicians, and that signal a new democratic sentiment. In this respect, the study demonstrates a need to reconstruct youth participation and citizenship within the context of intergenerational relations and a new social contract with young people.

# 4.0 BUILDING BACK FAIRER: YOUNG PEOPLE'S HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout the pandemic, young people had mixed views about the future. The vaccination rollout made some feel more positive about the situation and hopeful, in spite of some residual anxiety about the slow take-up of vaccinations, easing of restrictions at pace despite the presence of new variants and increasing rates of infection towards November 2021. Young people were worried about the prospects of new closures and hopeful they could continue seeing their friends, enjoying their social lives, engaging in different activities and having school and work experiences which allowed them to experience new environments.

Concerns were also expressed about work and the future. This was particularly apparent among the group of young researchers in Italy, who described the labour market as “painful” and “bleak” to the point that they preferred not to think about it. They agreed that, if youth employment opportunities in Italy were scant before the pandemic, they were even more disheartening now.

“People of our age, an age of decisions you have to take, of changes you have to make, which found themselves projected in a reality of crisis, I think they suffer way more from this situation.”

(Female, 16, Italy)

There was also some unease that key social issues the pandemic had thrown into the spotlight would be forgotten with the “quest to return back to normal quickly”, and that the general public and politicians would not take advantage of what they had learned during and because of the pandemic.

“As a collective generation, many young people have picked up on issues highlighted from the pandemic of inequality, poverty and more and have more hope going forward that such issues can be resolved.”

(Female, 18, UK)

Nonetheless, anxieties about what the future might hold were tempered with some reassurance that the ‘limbo’ of the initial lockdowns had passed and that firmer plans could be made. The prospect of job-seeking and gaining work experience seemed reassuringly pragmatic and familiar.

For some young people, the experiences of the past 18 months had helped to crystallise new ideas for careers or education, reflecting a change of personal priorities, new skills gained, or anticipation of a jobs market that may adapt to a more digitalised and 'green' economy. Some were rethinking career options in terms of job security and the ability to work from home, which they had not previously considered:

"Before the pandemic I was very secure in what I wanted to do, but the pandemic has made me think about it a bit more, so what do I want to do with my life?"

(Female, 15, UK)

"Tomorrow I've got an open day with this fashion university and I'm like I might be going down that career path. I was interested before, but now it's my favourite lesson and in all my frees... I'm in the textiles room creating and making. I suppose the lockdown has done that!"

(Female, 17, UK)

## 4.1 Future proofing – young people's contingency plans for a future pandemic

In looking ahead, young people were keen to ensure that the lessons from the pandemic were learned and that mistakes were not repeated. This was a recurring topic at panel discussions and formed the basis of one of the concluding exercises for the project, prior to drafting the final report. In considering how best to respond in the eventuality of another pandemic; young people proposed a number of concrete actions, which are expressed in their own words in the tables below<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted that some of the actions (and proposed actors) have a country-specific focus, where young people were relating to their specific context.

- I) Dealing with misinformation
- II) Contingency planning
- III) Exercise and mental health
- IV) The Economy; and
- V) Communities.

<sup>1</sup> Particular thanks go to Monty Lord, a young person from one of the UK panels, who took the lead on collating feedback and formulating the actions that are presented in the tables in this section.

## DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION

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### → Have regular televised check-ins from the government every week:

The government could run a weekly TV slot in which they attempt to ease the minds of public by hopefully showing decreasing figures and showing us what they intend to do in order to reduce the infection rate, should they continue to rise. This would be better than the previous lockdowns, in which we were mostly left in the dark as to what plans the government had until they were enacted.

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### → The provision of more positive news instead of just the constant negativity:

For those living alone during the lockdown periods they were constantly bombarded by a barrage of solely negative news. Whether this was through traditional media outlets or even social media there was little to no positive news. Maybe, instead of news outlets broadcasting 24/7 news about the pandemic, they could strike a balance between informing the public about the pandemic and also more positive news. For example, there was almost no televised news coverage about the efforts people had made to make lockdowns easier for others by doing acts such as delivering medicine to the elderly. Legislation may be required to provide for social media companies to ensure their own content, in relation to the pandemic, is fact-checked or a warning/advisory message appears associated with the social media post.

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## DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION

### → Regular news panels to engage directly with communities and education establishments:

One of the key issues that has come out of the COVID pandemic is the fact that many children and young people will obtain their information from their peers, social media, targeted YouTube videos and their parents. The problem arises if a parent or other content they're exposed to, has a particular bias or whether it's based on objective information at all. In the absence of this information & guidance provided through the government in schools, what we have seen happening amongst the younger generation is a high degree of Confirmation Bias. This is the tendency for example, for teenagers to hear incorrect information from peers and via social media and they then search for, interpret and favour online information that confirms and further supports these new beliefs. The result is, they then recall this misguided information, with conviction to their friends. It's important, therefore, for the government to provide detailed news briefings on a weekly basis or whenever a new development arises, and for these briefings to be intended to be played by staff in schools. This would have to be enforced by the [UK] Department for Education. It would ensure that the correct information gets directly to the children, without any outside interference.

### → Encourage young people to do their own independent research on the virus:

This may remove any impartiality or bias that news outlets may present. For example, many news companies may have a political bias so could twist news about the pandemic to make a particular political party seem better or worse. This could result in people learning misinformation about the virus. These research projects could be recommended to schools through the Department for Education or other trustworthy organisations like CREST (British Science Association).

## CONTINGENCY PLANNING

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→ **The government should immediately put plans in place for how schooling will be operated, as well as the assessment of end-of-year examinations:**

Since the start of the pandemic, March 2020, there was little transparency from the government as to how exams would be assessed for both the 2020 and 2021 academic years until quite late into the year. This led to great deals of uncertainty and anxiety amongst young people. It is also still unclear as to whether this academic year, 2022, will be teacher-assessed like the previous two years.

Young children in foundational education have been severely hindered by not being able to learn basic concepts such as the alphabet, addition, subtraction, etc. This may have a profound effect in the future on these children's lives and society as a whole.

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→ **Think of ways to ensure that shopping can be delivered to homes instead of visiting shops:**

During the lockdowns, a large portion of the spread of COVID came from people coming into contact with each other in supermarkets doing essential shopping. If it's possible to reduce this factor by having an increase in home delivery the spread of a virus would be significantly decreased. A rise in home delivery would also help create jobs as delivery drivers for those suffering financially. One of the UK's largest employers, the British Army, could be used to provide logistics support in this area.

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→ **Have a clear direction at the earliest opportunity:**

During the first lockdown, there was no clear end goal date for people to look forward to. People were told that it was until the virus had significantly decreased in numbers. If another pandemic were to occur it may be a better idea to provide the public with a vague idea of a date that can either be pushed back or moved forward. Whether this date is the actual date a lockdown ends is not relevant. What is relevant is giving the public hope and an end date to look forward to.

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# EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH

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## → Run public exercise schemes:

If the government was able to run/finance some kind of exercise scheme this could see a significant decrease in those suffering from depression during a lockdown. This would later relieve an unnecessary burden on mental health-related illnesses through the NHS. Research has shown a direct correlation between exercise and happiness. A public exercise scheme would also help keep people fit and healthy whilst gyms are closed. This scheme could be run through a regular televised TV fitness show – possibly similar to Nuffield Health's offering or maybe even a state run/funded app.

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## → Decrease prices of healthy food:

This would ensure a way for people to stay healthy whilst gyms are closed. Healthy food is also more likely to make people feel happier in a lockdown scenario than if people were just constantly eating junk food. This would be vital and a simple help in lockdown as many struggled with mental health.

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## → Schemes for mental health:

During lockdown, many people living alone had a severe lack of socialisation and suffered feelings of isolation and anomie. This led to a stark increase in those suffering from mental health issues. In the future, the government should provide more resources to ensure this doesn't happen or at least mitigate the effects of it. They could possibly do something like set up mental wellbeing apps, with content from mental health practitioners. They could also encourage people to check-in on one another. There's a wide variety as to what the government could do about mental health if a future pandemic was to happen. They could even temporarily increase funding to services that offer help for mental health, such as CAMHS<sup>2</sup> for children and young people. When the government rolled out their Community Responder app, allowing residents to sign up to respond in their local communities. This, however, excluded young people and they were very willing to help out, even just through making phone calls to those who felt isolated and lonely.

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<sup>2</sup> Child and Adult Mental Health Services – the statutory public health provision for children and young people with mental health problems in England.

# THE ECONOMY

## → Use the lockdown to make jobs for young people:

Lockdown could create jobs for people like delivery drivers and IT apprentices. This would help young people who may not be financially stable to have a stream of income coming in during what was a tough time. This may allow them to pay for necessities such as shopping and things of that nature.

## → Provide more funding and grants to businesses:

This would ensure that businesses would be able to stay afloat during lockdowns when they may receive little to no customers. It would also allow businesses to continue to pay workers instead of sacking them to save money. This helps both the business and the workers.

## → Reduction in university fees:

During the previous two years in lockdown, most universities have continued to charge students full tuition fees whilst students are not attending lectures in-person. Many students complain that this reduces the quality of learning. It needs to be questioned whether it is fair to continue to charge students at a full price when they are not receiving a full experiential learning cycle.

## → Provide stimulus cheques to those over a certain age (most likely 16 or 18) to jumpstart the economy after a lockdown:

Stimulus cheques of \$2000 were granted to those in the United States of America after the lockdowns to help boost their economy. This was not used in the UK during COVID but is a viable option should a future pandemic arise. It seemed to have a positive effect on the US economy after its use, so why not also be a consideration here? It would also serve as an extra bit of cash for people who may have lost jobs during the pandemic or have been on a significantly reduced wage.

## THE ECONOMY

### → Companies could be encouraged to provide free subscriptions or reduced subscriptions for things like Netflix:

During a lockdown most people have nothing to do except stay at home all day. These people quickly become bored and turned to things like online streaming services to quench that boredom. In a time when many may lose their jobs or be on a reduced income, streaming giants such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney + would probably not be too worse off financially if they reduced the price of a subscription for a couple of months. The government can encourage this commercial behaviour, perhaps with tax incentives.

### → The government could follow the advice of Marcus Rashford and provide free school meals to those in need during a period of national or regional lockdown:

During the lockdown periods, Marcus Rashford<sup>3</sup> started a campaign for children in need of free school meals to be provided with them during what would usually be both term-time and the school holidays. In a time when many families would be financially worse-off, it would be a great burden lifted off parents' shoulders if the government were able to provide meals for their children. If another pandemic were to occur, it would be hoped that the government would not need the provocation of somebody like Marcus Rashford and would instead provide these meals of their own accord.

### → Digital grants for online working:

Many employees and the self-employed, quickly had to pivot to start working from home. With all the various adaptations this brought to their working practices, it also required a strong, stable internet connection and in some cases the purchase of additional software or licences. This was an unanticipated business cost and for the self-employed who offer longer credit terms, they might not have had the necessary liquidity in their cash flow to enable immediate home working and what it entailed.

### → Utility grants for home workers:

Unanticipated pandemics require ordinary office-based workers to become home-based workers. This is not something they may have factored into their living expenses. The government should consider offering a utility grant when home-working is enforced upon the labour force.

<sup>3</sup> English professional footballer and sports personality

# COMMUNITIES

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## → Encourage young people to take a more active and caring role in society:

This could be through a variety of ways, for example, carrying out community projects like delivering goods to those who are vulnerable. It could even be something as small as checking up on friends and seeing how they are doing mentally.

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## → Use the opportunity to clean the streets of litter:

Streets are usually covered in litter, that even when picked up, is usually replaced by a new wave in about a week. If another pandemic were to occur and another lockdown was enforced, it may mean that the level of litter would be reduced by the initial litter picking and kept at a low level for a longer period of time. There would be less people in public so less litter being dropped. Hopefully society would then be able to see that places look better without litter cluttering the streets and litter may be permanently kept at a low level.

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## → Show the public the benefits of the reduced pollution:

During lockdown, petrochemicals and fumes from car exhausts being released into the atmosphere, were reduced as people stayed in the house more often. Many factories were also less likely to be producing products due to workers not being allowed into work, so factory pollutants were also decreased. The benefits were shown in the first COVID lockdown when dolphins were seen in the Venice canals.

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## → Making sure elderly people have the necessary medicine needed:

During the first lockdown, some members of their community took it upon themselves to deliver prescriptions to those who couldn't collect them themselves. If a future pandemic was to occur, the government could possibly implement a scheme to ensure this happens nationwide. It is also likely to create a paid job if it is state-run.

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## → More resources for the homeless:

Many homeless people may have felt as if there was nowhere for them to go during lockdown as some homeless shelters were shut. People may have also been less likely to provide food to the shelters that were open due to trying to ensure that they had enough food for themselves. In a future pandemic there should be places for the homeless to go, as well as the homeless being provided with the relevant PPE to make sure they're protected against the virus.

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Some young people also prepared individual checklists, as the following example illustrates.

### **IF IT HAPPENS AGAIN? ONE YOUNG PERSON'S CHECKLIST FOR MANAGING A FUTURE PANDEMIC.**

- ✓ Ensure there's a balance of positive and negative things on the news. All you'd hear about at some point was COVID and it was depressing.
- ✓ Having national guidelines is better than local schemes because the message is clear.
- ✓ Enforcing lockdowns is fine as long as people are provided with financial support as well as support with their mental and physical health and wellbeing. There really should've been a bigger push for mental health services to widen their support for all people. Physical health is really important and as more people were starting to exercise, more outdoor gyms should've been opened.
- ✓ Maybe having lockdowns isn't the answer. I was all pro lockdowns until you begin to balance things up. The best method is probably to educate the public on staying safe and let them do their own thing. I'm not sure if lockdowns are a bad or good thing. Pumping money into the NHS and trying to deal with the massive understaffing is probably also a good idea.
- ✓ More mental health support should've been provided for people living alone.
- ✓ Provide more bereavement support.
- ✓ Marcus Rashford's free school meals campaign has genuinely helped out my family quite a lot. The voucher scheme was fantastic in supporting my family.
- ✓ Schools should've done more to check up on students and provide support with their mental health. For example, having lessons on recognizing the signs of ill mental health and where to get support would've been beneficial.
- ✓ Having national events to boost morale is very important. Like with the football, having events to get everyone's minds off of COVID is very important.
- ✓ Keep the virtual events even after COVID because it means that you can access events even if you can't afford to get to certain places.
- ✓ Have a national educational catch-up scheme. I was helping out at my school for the year 6's joining our school in September and a lot of the kids didn't know the alphabet.

- ✓ If you're going to lift restrictions for Christmas, you should probably consider lifting restrictions for other religious celebrations as well. Or if you're going to change restrictions, don't wait until the night before the celebration- people have made plans.
- ✓ Ensure all school children have strong WIFI connections and access to a laptop in general.
- ✓ There should be an 'education roadmap' for what students should expect. If exams are to be cancelled or altered, students should be informed.
- ✓ Universities should be investigated as to where their money has been allocated in the past 2 years. Is it fair to charge such large sums of money from students when the quality of learning at uni was decreased by such a large amount?
- ✓ The government should invest more money into making more parks for children and setting up more green spaces and outdoor gyms. An effort to clean up litter should be established.
- ✓ Public transport should be free for all under-18s all over the UK.
- ✓ Places where communities can garden together should be made to tackle loneliness.
- ✓ There should be a youth advisory panel in the government where young people all over the UK can come together to help inform decision makers.
- ✓ Ways to tackle misinformation (especially on the topic of vaccinations) should be discussed.
- ✓ It didn't feel like the government were consulting the public in their decision-making processes. I feel as if politicians should be reminded that their role is to represent and advocate for the public.

# 5.0 THROUGH THE LENS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

The project adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which was central to how the research was designed, implemented, and reported upon. In this section, we reflect on the PAR methods. We appraise their relative advantages and limitations and consider the experiences and outcomes for young people who took part. We also critically reflect on the PAR process from the viewpoint of the adult researchers.

## 5.1 PAR methods and their role within the project

Young people across panels engaged regularly with adult researchers throughout the project, through bi-weekly or monthly group discussions, which have provided them with an opportunity not only to gather their thoughts but also to share findings from their own individual research projects - and related conversations with family, friends, teachers, and classmates - as well as from the extra-curricular activities they participated in, such as community volunteering activities, youth networks, and meetings with local politicians. Regular discussions also served as a platform for young people to listen to each other, seek advice and find comfort. Some young people used the online collaborative platform as a diary through which they shared their experiences and views with the other co-researchers. Young people from the different countries also had the opportunity to interact with each other, through the youth-led event organised by the project in February 2021, and through cross-panel meetings.

Throughout all these meetings, topics young people chose to focus on spanned education and changes to school life; politics and the government response to the crisis; concerns around fake news with relation to the vaccine, and around data privacy related to contact tracing digital applications; adaptation challenges under the 'new normal'; mental health; as well as future prospects, in terms of education and employment. In Singapore, the panel engaged with teachers and remained open to the learning from a wide range of activities carried out by participants during the crisis, including a project supporting migrant workers. The Italian panel also decided to invite guest speakers to join the conversation and bring a different perspective about issues affecting them. This included friends, teachers, public officials and a child neuropsychiatrist. The panel also collaborated with the local theatre Teatro Biondo in Palermo for an episode about coping mechanisms. These external influences played an important role in introducing new ideas and stimuli.

**A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH A CHILD NEUROPSYCHIATRIST (BY CLARA, ITALY)**

In April 2021 our research team from the Italian panel had the chance to meet a child neuropsychiatrist, to discuss how COVID-19 has impacted young people's life and mental health. We enjoyed using group discussion as a research tool, and sometimes we would invite guests so we could have an external point of view. Since some of us, including me, were very interested in the psychological implications of COVID-19, one of our adult researchers invited a child neuropsychiatrist to join one of our meetings."

**What we talked about...**

We had so many questions to ask! We wanted to know more about the different reactions everyone has when facing a crisis, how our brain acts to protect us, which long-term consequences this crisis could have in our society, and how it might affect children and teenagers who are facing it during their developmental age. It was a unique opportunity, because we were able to talk to a professional in an informal context, and to create a discussion where we could not only satisfy our curiosity, but also talk about our feelings and experiences. I really liked how the doctor made us feel comfortable during the whole conversation, as if we were talking with a friend, because this helped us to open up and talk about our own feelings and worries.

We talked a lot about coping mechanisms, and how everyone has different methods to overcome a different situation: I was surprised to see how amazingly our brain works to keep us safe, even when we don't notice it. Talking about social life, we discussed how the pandemic changed the way we see the other person, how being parted from family and friends has a terrible emotional impact on us, and how we are becoming less able to trust the other. He said that "once we overcome the fear of COVID-19, we will have to overcome the fear of the other". We agreed on the fact that this will certainly have an impact on our society in the future, even if right now we don't know how."



### What we discovered...

It was surprising to find out how in that period many young people, including my friends from the research panel, were feeling the same as me. We were all feeling this sense of loss, for all the experiences and opportunities we were missing on, and for many of us the present had almost lost its meaning because the future was so uncertain. We felt like time was slipping out of our hands, but at the same time during quarantine one hour seemed to last forever. It was hard for us to fully understand such complex emotions, but the doctor was able to make them clear: listening to his words I almost felt like I could see my emotions and I finally started validating them, it was something I had never experienced before.

I started realizing how much I had grown as a person during the pandemic, and how many new things I was learning about the world and myself. We as humans have an incredible ability to adapt and overcome difficulties, we often don't even realize how much potential we have, and this potential comes out during a moment of crisis, when we most need it. This meeting made me understand more deeply my negative emotions, but also opened my eyes to how those emotions help us grow.

After the discussion we were all very touched, because we had met such an inspiring person who had helped us so much. Talking with the other people in the group, I could see that everyone had so many new ideas and reflections to share. This experience helped us understand many things about what is inside us, and what's inside the people we have around. We all knew we had learned something important that day, something that will stay for us during these hard times."

Young people were also actively involved in a number of dissemination opportunities. First, outputs from their individual research projects were regularly published on the project website. Other opportunities included the youth-led event “Young People Speak Out”, hosted by the Nuffield Foundation, chaired by two young co-researchers, and involving other young co-researchers as key speakers; a webinar organised by COVID Realities focused on the use of diaries as a research method; a workshop organised by the British Academy (BA), which involved experts and policy-makers and was meant to shape BA’s childhood policy; as well as journal articles and blog posts which saw young people as co-authors or contributors.

### Materials from the ‘Young People Speak Out!’ webinar

It was not uncommon for young people to independently disseminate the research findings through their own networks, including through meetings with local politicians (e.g., the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People, NICCY), presentations to classmates and members of youth organisations, a podcast hosted by Participation People, and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.



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Through video, storytelling and debate, young people will reflect on their research, and the recommendations from the first published report: [To Lockdown and Back](#).

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## 5.2 Advantages and drawbacks of young people's participation as co-researchers with adults

At the end of the project, young people reflected on their experience of PAR and what they had taken from this. For many, the project had afforded unique insights to how their peers experienced the pandemic, across the UK and internationally, to connect with these experiences, and to use them to reflect on their daily lives during the crisis. For example, the Italian group reported having gained a better awareness of the struggles that LGBTQ+ young people were facing at home, and the situation of those living in Lebanon, who could only access schoolwork via WhatsApp and dealt with frequent power cuts. They felt that these different experiences had been made evident to them through doing their own research and communicating with others within the project through the panel meetings and the cross-country panels.

“Doing the surveys across England and seeing how like even like people like a 20-minute drive from me had a completely different experience to me, and for people up in the North it was completely different.”

(Female, 18, UK)

“Hearing all about how differently we all handled the same virus in various aspects was a truly eye-opening experience that left no room for a narrow-level view of the world's current events.”

(Female, 17, Lebanon)

For one young person based in Scotland, sharing their thoughts with the other young people during the UK panel discussions and cross-country meetings had given them an **increased awareness of how their country was coping with the COVID-19 pandemic relative to others**. Whilst being critical of the UK's approach in many ways, they developed an enhanced appreciation of how their country had performed in some areas, such as the provision of the National Health Service.

“That kind of contrast highlighted how lucky I was to live in Scotland...and how lucky we are to have such a fantastic health system”

(Male, 15, UK)

They thought that breaking off into smaller country-specific panels worked well to **compare and contrast** their experiences, as well as government policies and media representation of the situation, with those within their own country, and then more internationally during the cross-country panels.

"I really like when we split off the different countries in different panels because I think it allows it to be even better when we all come together to that big group discussion. Because then we can say 'well, as a group from the UK, we've done that' and then we can talk to other panels from around the world"

(Male, 15, UK)

"It was an opportunity to discuss COVID with both Italian and foreign peers and to be able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of certain policies undertaken by the respective local and national governments."

(Male, 18, Italy)

Reflecting on elements of the project that they liked, the young people agreed that the **group discussions and cross-country panels** were one of their favourite elements of the project. They found it inspiring to hear of other young people's ideas and experiences and found it interesting to see that, despite the differences, there were also similarities in young peoples' experiences across the cohort.

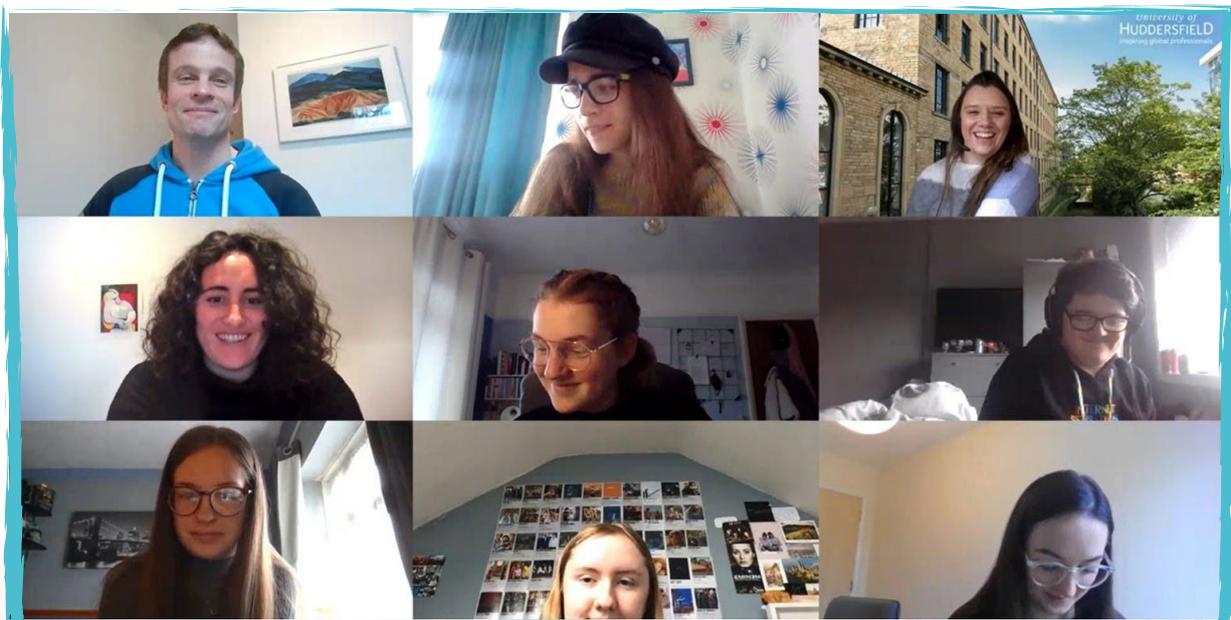
"The cross-country panels, they were quite cool because we got to see different artworks and different work from other countries who were trying to tackle the same problems, trying to get through the pandemic as well."

(Male, 18, UK)

"The cross-country panels were a lot of fun. Coz like it showed how we were all in the same boat in a sense. Like we were all going through it differently, but like struggling at similar times and it was all hard on all of us no matter where we were."

(Female, 17, UK)

**Online PAR in action – adult researchers and young people hold a cross-country panel discussion**



Young people also valued the opportunity to **conduct their individual research projects**, investigating in depth issues that mattered to them in relation to the pandemic, as well as being able to explore the opinion of friends and relatives more closely, through surveys, interviews, and social media, in their own country and abroad. Many had mentioned the importance of having time to dedicate to better understand the situation and form their critical opinion about that, including by keeping a research diary. These activities maintained a close connection between research and action at all times.

“Surely, thanks to all these experiences, I discovered new platforms useful for research, as well as reinforcing previous knowledge. Especially in the last cycle of the project, I discovered how much social media can also have benefits on our study of the issue. From the development of various Google Forms, or surveys, I have compared the various positions of various people interviewed, in particular on the school and the education sector. Furthermore, not always everything you hear on the news is actually reality.”

(Male, 18, Italy)

“I’ve found myself listening more to my friends and asking them their opinions on issues we’ve faced. I’ve also spent more time than I would have in the past forming my own opinion and taking time to consider how things are impacting me. My video diary allowed me to take time every few weeks to check in with myself and consider how my life is changing. In the future I will continue to monitor my own well-being.”

(Female, 18, UK)

The young people also liked that the project had given them the opportunity to **take ownership of their research** and make their own decisions about how to complete it. One young person particularly valued the experience of carrying out peer-to-peer interviews and thinking through the steps from research design to analysis and reporting. Another young person liked the flexibility of doing their own qualitative research including self-reflection and analysis using social media. The autonomy to explore themes that were meaningful independently was an important part of the experience, while also collaborating with adults:

“I’ve taken part in some other projects, and they’ve given the young people like barely any area to do what they wanted. Whereas what I liked about this project is they allowed us to do our research how we wanted to do it and then present it how we wanted to”

(Female, 18, UK)

“Research projects often are dominated by the researchers, making it a fairly boring experience (sorry) and not worth the mental effort it takes me to engage. I am used to not having a voice, or being spoken over, and I’m often quite intimidated by very assertive activist/budding politician kinds of people... I have to say, applying was certainly worth it this time, and actually led me to apply for other things, too.”

(Non-binary, 17, UK)



Excerpt from one young person's research, which focused on the use, politics, and social implications of face masks, as a symbol of the pandemic

Some young people also appreciated the **concrete outputs** resulting from this project, in terms of the website, the publications

and the events, and how faithfully they felt the reports conveyed their voice. They felt that social media or radio would be a good way to engage others in the project learning through short posts and that there would be value in using more creative formats such as videos and podcast alongside or in place of more formal reporting outputs. One young person gave some examples of some youth-friendly outputs that they thought worked well. They liked the short bullet-point structure of high-level recommendations used in the '[Recommendations from Phase 1](#)' and the Visual Article developed for a peer reviewed academic journal as a collaboration between young people and adult researchers.

### Doing PAR – a messy business?

The project participants also highlighted challenges that were presented by 'doing PAR'. While the reflective space of the project was welcomed during the periods of lockdown, this had become more difficult to sustain when schools reopened and there was a need to balance project activities with studies. Nonetheless, having established routines such as diary entries, posts on Yammer and podcasts or artwork, many of the young people had found it welcome to be able to pause and return, or to scale their time commitments to the project up or down according to what else was happening at the time. The panel format provided a means of reconnecting with other young people and the adult researchers as a continuing window for reflexivity.

Similarly, the ways in which young people carried out PAR were by no means static. The young people experimented with different media, some of which proved successful and others less so. This often helped to keep their participation feeling purposeful and with the aim of finding the best ways to communicate ideas or experiences. Several of the young people presented on this topic at a webinar organised by the Nuffield Foundation following the first cycle of project activity, with a particular focus on the role of research diaries.

The example overleaf provides a short excerpt from the recording, where one young person discusses the ways in which she adapted her working methods during the project following initial experimentation.



## CONDUCTING DIARY-BASED RESEARCH – PERSONAL REFLECTIONS (ISRA, 17, UK)

### January 2021

During lockdown I started a research diary where I would document what I do every single day. My mood, my productivity, any questions I have I'd highlight. Then I would take a photo of it and post it Yammer [online communication platform], hoping that other people would engage with it. But because it's a diary... people were less likely to engage with it, because it seems like it's personal and that you shouldn't be, even though that's what I want[ed].

So I switched from this to using Yammer. And that was actually more effective because it forced me to be less waffly, get straight to the point... ask questions that I want to get across really quickly... So, say I had an interesting conversation with my dad about finances and how COVID's impacting his work,... I would put something on Yammer, ask a question at the end, and get responses from my panel. Or if I saw something interesting on social media about COVID, I would put my thoughts and feelings on Yammer and people would comment about that.

Using Yammer has been very, very effective for documenting how my siblings are experiencing COVID because not only do I input what my siblings and I are going through, but I'm also getting responses from other people about how their families are going through it as well. So that helps to steer my research in the right direction.

## 5.3 What young people gained from their participation in the project

Many young people felt that they better understood the **value of research**, after having taken part in the project, and of being able to question more conventional understandings of what 'research' entails and the relationship between action and learning. This is especially the case in Italy, where participants reported having had limited opportunities to conduct to pursue their own research interests within formal education.

"From this project I feel I have learned a lot: from the point of view of research I have discovered a sea in which I had never sailed before, I have understood that research is not just asking questions and waiting for answers, it is much more!"

(Female, 16, Italy)

"Research has certainly taught me to notice details around me that otherwise I would have overlooked: I tend to pay much more attention to the behavior of those around me, especially those related to the crisis. I also learned a lot about myself, my personality, my resources and how I process what happens. The project made it possible for me to learn to ask myself questions and to listen to my answers."

(Female, 17, Italy)

The acquisition of new skills was a further self-reported benefit of participating in the project. This included where young people performed research tasks (desk research, surveys, interviewing, data analysis), and the teamwork and critical thinking skills, become clearer about their future academic paths, and built confidence in vocalising their opinions – including with peers from other cultures and countries. The social learning dimension and encouragement to address moral, ethical and citizenship themes within the study was strongly interconnected with the acquisition of technical skills in this context, involving both research and action.

"I think doing the research myself not only helped for my studying because obviously it's part of the topic. But it's positively affected me as it made me question more things and not take things as such like matter of fact. Definitely it helped me questioning which helped me in my day-to-day life. It made me better at communicating... with talking to people from across the UK."

(Female, 18, UK)

"The project lasted a little over a year, but the things I learned are certainly the basis which will serve me throughout my professional but also private life. I learned to work in a group; to deal with people I have never had the possibility to meet in person but that I hope to meet one day; I have learned to have the certainty of my knowledge, be able to present my thesis with lots of data and personal opinions; I have learned to be more confident in what I believe, what I support and... what I am."

(Female, 17, Italy)

Young people felt that the project had instilled the **importance of self-reflection, observation, and open-mindedness** in them, including an appreciation of peoples' individual experiences and greater empathy towards those. They felt that this lesson led them to "become more compassionate towards others" and that this could be taken on board by adult professionals who work with young people.

"We were seeing like all of these different experiences and different scenarios and like different situations that people are in and we knew that some people were better off than others... So it's just reaffirming to keep open minded... and sort of like taking care of young people that way. Because everyone is going through something, and you got to like try a bit more to find out rather than just like sitting back and trying to accept that."

(Male, 18, UK)

Reflecting on how the project had influenced their experiences of the pandemic, the young people both felt that they had become increasingly **aware of youth rights** over the course of the project. One young person had been **inspired to take part in activism** from seeing that lots of young people who took part in their research had joined – or intensified their participation in – activism and youth movements of various kinds.

"I noticed it with a lot of people. The pandemic helped them to realize like some of the things they'd get upset over on a daily basis just weren't that big of an issue, and like there's bigger things in the world that you can be fighting for. And then go on to start fighting for those things as well."

(Female, 18, UK)

"Being part of this project affected me personally in a very positive way, I started to know my rights as young person which made me feel the responsibility to maintain my rights... I attended some meetings with other countries, and I witnessed what we can do to help each other and that's motivates me to be a better citizen and a better leader to help my people especially youth in this period of time especially in Lebanon."

(Female, 16, Lebanon)

Through this approach, many of the young people challenged not only their previously held assumptions about their own competence as social actors, but also their preconceptions about the competence of their peers. This included, for example, where young people had gained first-hand experience of working alongside others of a similar age who with mental health problems, a disability or a chronic long-term health condition. This process of resetting expectations was documented through the young people's research.



I have witnessed with my own eyes that disabled people are more than capable of exercising their voice, if you give them the right platform and support to do it. It would just be very nice to know that one day, I could be the reason another disabled person feels confident enough to express themselves. Even if it is just one person, I would be delighted. This [project] has given me the slight confidence boost, in knowing that maybe I can do these things, after all... Also, perhaps this is not entirely related, but this was one of the first places I came out as non-binary to. And it meant a great deal to me to not only be respected, but actively included in discussions related to it, without judgement or question."

(Non-binary, 17, UK)

The young people also felt that participating in the project had been a coping mechanism throughout the pandemic. It was felt that the project had supported them to keep busy, stay engaged, maintain a routine, and continue learning at a time when they felt that school learning had been lacking. For one young person, the project was important to avoid boredom and “spend this time in the best possible way”. For others, the project provided “something to channel some purpose into” as they felt that their research was meaningful, whilst also offering some relief from the stresses of their daily life.

“This definitely became a coping mechanism for me. I always like to keep myself busy because it helped to distract me from like all the stress and everything I’m feeling. And then when I realized that I was just not getting the same level of learning from school that it was like I needed something so I didn’t stress myself out and then this became a way of realizing that I could do good and keep myself busy at the same time and that the research I was doing was useful.”

(Female, 18, UK)

“I like to think of the project as a bit like a mirror. It allowed for a lot of self-reflection during lockdown ‘cause it forced you to think ‘how am I feeling right now?’”

(Male, 15, UK)

“This project was of great help to me, it made me discover a world unknown to me, hours to dedicate to all the news that mattered to us, all the changes...but it was also a moment of common vent and I believe that in this period, it was my salvation, my point of reference, of fun, talking to other people almost made me forget to live in this “prison”. It taught me to appreciate the little things that, overwhelmed by a hectic life, I had forgotten”

(Female, 17, Italy)

The young people also valued the **opportunity to connect with their peers** at a time when COVID-19 related restrictions limited their social contact. Discussing their experiences with other young people – who listened to and valued each other’s views and experiences – enabled them to meet others, develop a sense of shared experience and turn negatives into positives through discussions and mutual inspiration.

“This project was, for me, a worldwide outlet to share my thoughts and observations to people and participants willing to listen and engage. Having this project constantly pushing me to form opinions and ideas about current issues around me has kept me grounded, aware, and creative through daily life. It has also helped in keeping a positive mentality through hard situations by helping turn negatives into inspirations and creations.”

(Female, 16, Lebanon)

“The participation in the project allowed me to do something that I had not had the possibility to do: meet new people. I enjoyed the moments of confrontation and sometimes also of venting. The people I met, they were the ones who taught me that I’m not insufficient, I am not inferior to anyone, I am simply a girl like many others, unusual in some respect, but it’s me.”

(Female, 17, Italy)

Understanding and discussing the commonalities in experiences and struggles, even with young people from different countries and life situations, helped young co-researchers to feel less isolated and find mutual support, as well as to gather and develop new perspectives on how they could react to and cope with this challenging experience. Young people from Italy believed that schools were not providing such a platform for open discussion and mutual support, which contributed to many of their friends’ deteriorating mental health.

“I learned of different experiences that have opened me to new ways of facing this difficult situation. In our research group, we found many similar situations. When we discussed these, I felt less alone about the difficulties I faced, which I have learned to be unfortunately common during this pandemic, especially for young people who have suffered a lot, as they have not been listened to and understood. Certainly, this experience was useful for understanding how research is conducted and how one can relate even at a distance, in critical moments like these.”

(Male, 15, UK)

“What struck me most was the discovery that what I was feeling was a feeling common to many other people, I realized that I was not the only one to feel many conflicting emotions that confused me a lot. Through our discussions I have felt the stress of this period drastically decrease. This is one of the main reasons why I am so happy to have been part of this project.”

(Female, 16, Italy)

Throughout the 18 months and the regular discussions, young people also got to know themselves, each other, and the adult researchers better, developing bonds and friendships, opening about their concerns and intimate struggles, and giving each other advice, in ways that were often not afforded at school or at home, and allowed them to grow together during the pandemic.

Overall, young people believed that the project and its dialogic nature afforded them **opportunities for personal growth**, including better listening skills, greater self-awareness, and a reassessment of their priorities, among other things.

"I also learned a lot about myself: I learned to know how to listen better and to put myself first when needed, in this I was helped a lot by my peers from the Italian group and the adult researchers. I dedicate my heartfelt thanks to them for having accompanied me in such a complicated period."

(Female, 16, Italy)

"The need to ask questions to others and myself has meant that an important period of personal growth began for me. First of all, just being able to talk to adult researchers and peers during meetings has always been beneficial, because often listening to the thoughts of others can help to put your own in order. And then I feel that, even if indirectly, the project has helped me make important decisions for my future with the right serenity. Now I am in a much better state of mind than a year ago, I was able to get to know myself better, I know what I want to become and I know that I am able to take the right steps to do so."

(Female, 17, Italy)

Despite the undeniable difficulties and moments of despair, many young people also talked about how they developed psychological strength, through learning to cope with the pandemic, and found in themselves skills and resources they did not know they had, and they might have not discovered, if not because of COVID-19.

"It is important to make your voice heard, since often to achieve wellbeing, it is necessary to be listened to by those who can help us. But it is equally important, in my opinion, to learn to listen to your own voice. During my research I have focused a lot on individuality, on personal growth and on how our mind and body react in moments of crisis, and if there is one thing that I have learned in these months, it is that each of us is much stronger than you think, and that in us there are resources that we do not even imagine, which can come to light in moments of greatest need.

(Female, 17, Italy)

## 5.4 Adult researcher reflections on the PAR process

At its heart, PAR is about participants taking an active role in researching their situation with a view to changing it. The value is two-fold. First, in producing narratives of experience and sense-making based on in-depth inquiry and reflection. Second, through such critical inquiry, generating learning that can inform change. PAR is thus less about researchers collecting data from participants, instead is about learning in action according to what is meaningful for participants. This means there has to be flexibility in the research process, providing the space that enables participants to direct the research according to their own terms of reference.

*“For me, the key thing is that it’s meaningful. Young people are actively engaged in a project where they can shape its design, content and outputs. It produces outputs that can be used in a variety of different ways long after the research has ended”.*

*(Adult Researcher)*

This is especially pertinent in research with young people who, as a result of their generational positioning, continue to be marginalised in research and decision-making processes. In spite of considerable advances in recognising and enabling young people’s voice and participation, their voices so often continue to go unheard, with adults continuing to assume they know what is best for young people. This was especially evident across participating countries in the pandemic. The PAR approach adopted in this project aimed to redress this power imbalance to provide young people with the space and support to explore and articulate their experiences – with all their inherent complexities and nuances – rather than simply respond to researcher questions.

Yet, we learnt that not all young people (or adults) are predisposed to working in this way, in part due to different national contexts. The UK has a long tradition of (especially NGO-driven) independent organisations and forums championing young people’s rights and participation, yet in other parts of the world, for example Lebanon (in this study), young people’s rights and speaking out are simply not on the radar. Hence in this study, whilst young people in Lebanon realised the value of joining this project and having their say, they did so within a national context where they felt disenfranchised and with little hope for the future and where they feel their voice doesn’t matter. These young people hence felt a degree of distance from the project’s ethos of activism and active citizenship, however, some sought to realise the benefits of the project.

“Young people from Lebanon, who are used to living in a place where they don’t feel their voice matters or is heard, suddenly had an international platform to channel some of their frustrations and worries. Whilst some struggled keeping engaged, others benefited greatly from the experience and seized the opportunity to explore the topics they were interested in.”

(Adult Researcher)

Even in Italy where some of the developments in children’s rights and child-centred practice have taken place, young people continue to feel their voice and interests are not valued on the national stage and have realised the value of this project to speak out.

Fundamentally therefore, one of the overarching arguments for adopting a PAR approach is to provide a genuine space for young people to engage in researching and tell their story of growing up under COVID on their own terms and in ways that is meaningful for them. In so doing they can develop the confidence and capabilities as action researchers, understanding and responding to the situations around them.

“PAR has enabled us as researchers to understand young people in a way that traditional research could never have, because young people have opened that door themselves, let us into their lives and shared their experiences of the pandemic in their most preferred way.”

(Adult Researcher)

So often research is conducted according to the agenda and research questions developed by adults. Whilst this is inevitable to a large extent given that being clear on research processes is instrumental in researchers securing funding, with a PAR approach there is significant possibility for flexibility to be built in to allow young people to be proactive in determining how project aims and objectives are met. A key consideration, however, is that in spite of the empowering intentions of PAR, some young people simply wanted more instruction and deadlines. And for some researchers, giving away some control was unnerving. Yet, evidence in this project revealed that through sustained commitment young people gradually build capacity and evolve the capacity for self-determination as researchers and active citizens. As one of the researchers reflected:



The key thing for me has been the dynamic nature of the process: seeing as the group started unsure about how to do research and expecting us to tell them what to focus about, to then grow more and more confident throughout the process, to the point they suggested inviting their friends, teachers, and external guests. It was extremely rewarding to see this evolution, as well as the bonding between us and the group, something that would not have happened in a traditional research process.

I enjoyed the freedom of the discussions, in terms of topics and structure, as they would always start from an informal discussion and then inevitably focus on their experiences, thoughts about the pandemic management, coping mechanisms ... becoming very intimate, allowing space for us all (including adult researchers) to share and find comfort. It became a safe space to talk about everything, make sense of the pandemic and find mutual support, something schools unfortunately didn't provide them with, and it provided comfort to them and to us researchers as well."

(Adult Researcher)

Beyond the immediate concern of generating new research findings, this quote also highlights the potential of PAR to transcend generational inequalities in research and change relationships between young people and adults to one of co-inquiry, emphasising mutuality and respect, in which both young people and adults grow and learn together.

One of the benefits of a PAR approach is that it provides a broader value for young people beyond the 'simple' research tasks of generating knowledge and collecting data. For young people there is a wider social value in engaging with adults and peers over time that can enhance feelings of inclusion, respect and active citizenship:

*"By the end of the project, I realised that I had been too hung-up on 'young people doing research', and that it was the social and relational aspects which were the most important – young people having a shared space to reflect on what was happening during the crisis, and the positivity and mutuality of young people and adults within the groups. The most active panels worked as 'social spaces', which also permeated young people's (and adults') actions outside of the panels."*

*(Adult Researcher)*

The wider value of this approach is also reflected in the benefits young people derived throughout the pandemic as a place of refuge and support, helping them to cope with and come to terms with the changes to everyday life that lockdown brought. This is reflected in young people's responses above, in particular the opportunity to express themselves in creative ways. These reflections bare testimony to the value of a PAR approach beyond research that respect and reify a commitment and recognition of young people as active citizens. In this respect, the approach helps to realise aspirations of participation and inclusion more readily. As one adult researcher reflected (in response to young people's feedback):

*"While they had really valued the engagement through the panels and the other events, there was a sense of "why does it take a grant funded project for this to happen?"*

This is an important question that challenges us to think more proactively about embedding youth participation in everyday life not just including them in one off occasional project spaces. As one researcher went on to reflect:

*"It also paints a pretty bleak picture about the (lack of) quality of opportunities that some young people have for participation within the adult world in their everyday lives".*

Adult researchers appreciated the value of the different perspectives and different ways of seeing that this approach permitted and is reflected for example in the creative and visual media young people engaged with, the perspectives they contributed, as well as the topics of importance they chose to focus on. A key facet of PAR is 'critical reflexivity', referring to inherent processes of critical questioning, inquiry, and reflection that can challenge thinking and practice, rather than simply respond with what they already know. In this project, it was evident that through their engagement young people were able to develop and extend their understanding of the COVID crisis (as well as wider social and political issues it surfaced) through deeper and sustained inquiry and reflection with others. This is not only beneficial for enriching the findings, but also for young people themselves as a process of social learning and a more informed sense of citizenship. This more dynamic research process included conversations with peers in other panels and in other countries as well as researchers and more significantly with people around them. The result is the depth of insights that have meaning for young people.

Whilst PAR is fundamentally about participants researching their own situations, the assumption is that this is undertaken with a view to equipping themselves with the means to make changes to their situation. An ongoing challenge for the research team in this project was to explore what that might mean in the context of the pandemic. On the one hand, we supported young people to go beyond documenting their experiences to communicate and engage in dialogue with key decision makers (e.g. The Mayor of Palermo and a representative from the Northern Ireland Executive). At the same time, 'action' was a focus of inquiry as young people actively explored what they could do to respond to some of the issues they were encountering. For example, through community support issues to ensure older people were able to get provisions, or in Singapore, support for migrant workers. This enabled us to gain some insights into different forms of participation young people conceived of through direct action rather than simply reporting their views to policy makers and professionals. In this way PAR allows us to go beyond a focus on researching young people's views, to instead research with young people about how they are living through, experiencing and responding to the pandemic as active citizens.

## NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF A TRANSNATIONAL PAR PROJECT CONDUCTED ONLINE

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→ **PAR is an unfamiliar approach for many young people and researchers alike.**

It is a different paradigm of research that requires learning about over time. Whilst the project still generated a wealth of rich insights, activating reflective learning within and across young people's research panels proved more difficult. This was in part because of the reasons given above, but also because of the time demands on young people in relation to their other life commitments, and adults' tendency to default to conventional research modus operandi.

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→ **There was a question of managing the power dynamics inherent to the roles of young people and adults.**

There were elements of both youth-led and adult-led decision making, and the project aspired towards an intergenerational partnership within which everyone's expertise was valued. But these dynamics were by no means easy to navigate. While the panel structure facilitated open and consultative engagement, it also highlighted the limitations of a traditional committee-based model of decision-making, and the potential inertia this can create.

There was a recognition at an early stage of the need to manage the co-existence of diverse views of what participation should look like, and of allowing spaces for multiple understandings within the umbrella of a single project. There were moments when young people operated as a collective (such as the Young People Speak Out! webinar), but it was equally important to give the time, space and autonomy for the individual country panels to establish their own identity and to determine how they wanted to operate, and to amplify individual voices and experiences beyond – and independently from – these collective modes of participation.

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## NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF A TRANSNATIONAL PAR PROJECT CONDUCTED ONLINE



“We have also realised the importance of flexibility in this project: depending on the panel, adult researchers had to adjust plans and use strategies that would best fit their group of young people. For example, the Italian panel preferred regular group meetings to discuss their research and provide feedback about the project in a conversational manner, whereas the Singapore panel wanted structured instructions with deadlines. This approach was best managed through individual contributions, whether in written form or through vlogs/videos.”

(Adult Researcher)

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→ **Despite the considerable achievements of undertaking this project entirely online, the reliance on virtual communication inhibited some of the more dynamic elements of the project concerning reflective learning and action.**

It placed a heavy onus on technological infrastructure, and finding platforms that all young people were able to access – something that proved more difficult than anticipated, requiring a combination of Yammer posts, email communication and texting to respond to young people’s circumstances in terms of connectivity, access, and personal tech preferences. The study team experienced ethical restrictions in the social media we could use due to data protection and safeguarding which prohibited young people’s choice of media, with a knock-on effect on their momentum to take initiative. The impact of the bureaucratic delays on the project and young people’s initiative should not be understated.

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## NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF A TRANSNATIONAL PAR PROJECT CONDUCTED ONLINE

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→ Perhaps partly because the project was conducted online, it was more of a challenge for young people from disparate contexts in each panel to cohere as a group.

Some young people were less gregarious with the result that some young people were more prominent in the groups than others and, accordingly, this resulted in different levels of engagement. A key reflection amongst the adult research leads therefore focused on the extent to which young people who were quieter or had less time available, were enabled sufficiently to engage with the process, for example using more of a scaffolded approach.

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→ The time commitment needed to support the participatory action research process over 18 months far exceeded our expectations

which affected what was possible in terms of realising the breadth of potential of PAR in resulting in impact.

“It was ... way more demanding and time consuming than a traditional research project: each young person required a tailored approach, to understand their interests, ways of working and how best to stimulate them and keep them engaged”.

(Adult Researcher)

There were many strands of research undertaken by different young people which were difficult to follow up on as individual endeavours. However, in adopting a collective approach, we were able to work with young people to communicate and extend the conversation further with others around some of the bigger issues. All the same, significant dissemination occurred with further events beyond the official project end being planned, including a policy roundtable and international events.

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→ A recurring challenge for all researchers was the difficulty in getting the right balance between realising the potential of the project and not wanting to overload young people.

There is no easy answer to this, given the importance of making opportunities available for those that are able to engage, and flexing the modes and media for participation.

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# 6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has presented a distillation of key messages and insights from a transnational PAR project conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project tracked key developments at a global level in 'real time' over this period from the perspective of 70 young people in the UK, Italy, Singapore and Lebanon. They performed the roles of researchers and social commentators, while also being immersed in the everyday realities of the crisis – from the mundane to the moments of great personal significance.

In the spirit of PAR, the project embodied learning-in-action, involving numerous cycles of learning, action and reflection, and as such the concept of a 'final report' is somewhat misleading. An important aspect of this project was to critically reflect and to share insights on a continuous basis in dialogue with fellow young researchers and the adult research team, and externally. This happened through web and social media dissemination of stories, diary excerpts, poetry, vlogs and blogs, through young people's participation in public webinars and lectures, the online publication of co-authored reports and papers and through their own self-initiated actions within their communities. This report is not intended to place a full stop at the end of these activities, but rather to help navigate them, to draw out some of the key messages, and to foreground young people's work.

With these caveats in mind, in this concluding chapter we present a number of reflections on the findings, and how they contribute to a growing evidence base for the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. We also examine the ways in which the PAR methodology shaped the project, and the learning from this approach for future work. We finish with a set of 10 recommendations, annotated with notes from young people to set them in the context of their own research and experiences, and to support with their implementation.

## Overall reflections

The project set out to examine young people's views and experiences of the COVID-19 crisis using a qualitative research design, working alongside young people longitudinally, and adopting the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Looking back over the 18 months, it is important to critically reflect on this particular methodology and the experiences of the young people involved, and to locate the specific contributions of the study within a wider literature on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Rethinking the narrative – multiple COVID-19 voices and stories

At one level, the research affirms the widely reported themes of educational disruption, learning loss (Vuorikari, et. al., 2020; Di Pietro, et. al., 2020) and the indications of a growing mental health crisis among the youth population in the wake of the pandemic. It also supports evidence that the pandemic has almost certainly compounded pre-existing social inequalities (Blaskó & Schnepf, 2021, OECD, 2021). It was clear that the 2020

lockdowns were immensely challenging for young people with pre-existing mental health problems, exacerbating the issues that they already faced. Young people also expressed concerns about their peers whom they considered to be at risk of harm while cut off from their support networks, including LGBTQI+ young people confined with family members who did not recognise their gender identity, and young people experiencing family conflict whose status was less visible when communicating online.

The research has provided valuable insights to young people's agency and resourcefulness, unsettling the 'victims and villains' narrative that has dominated public and media discourses during so much of this period. The young researchers on the project certainly rued missed experiences, milestones and rites of passage, but their stories were complex and nuanced, and the pandemic gave rise to a myriad of contradictions. Many had experienced positive changes in their lives during the 'pause' of the 2020 lockdowns, having acquired the time and space to re-invest in family or peer relationships, to focus on their wellbeing and self-care, and to rediscover leisure or creative activities. The pandemic corresponded with an important part of their adolescence, and this was still a time of growing and learning, of relationships and of being a teenager. These growth and learning experiences sat somewhat uncomfortably with the tragedies of the unfolding global public health emergency, and the ironies were not lost on the young people. What, for some, was a period of self-reflection and re-connecting, was for others isolating and traumatic.

The period also prompted young people to question what had gone before – the realisation of the need for a break from busy curricula and exam pressures, and the scarcity of opportunities for having a meaningful say in how education, healthcare and other services are planned and delivered. Young people were rarely nostalgic about a return to the status quo, even where they missed other aspects of their personal lives. The focus of their research widened to include social issues that had been reflected in the mirror of the pandemic, as well as critical questioning of political leadership, the handling of the public health emergency and its direct consequences and, more broadly, the nature of democracy and their place in it.

## Growing and learning through crisis – active citizens

The project illustrated the ways in which the magnitude of the crisis and its injustices contributed towards a heightened social and political awareness. Many young people were actively engaged in action of different kinds – within their local communities, with faith groups, and online through activities organised on WhatsApp groups with their peers, or through activism – Climate Emergency, Black Lives Matter, and other movements that gained momentum during this period. This was not the reserve of the 'already engaged' but applied also to young people with little or no prior experience of participation in structured youth forums or networks, manifesting in more spontaneous small, but meaningful, actions within their families or schools. In particular, the pandemic

showcased the untapped potential of social media and online platforms in maintaining contact with peers and family, and triangulating news and information about the pandemic and global events.

Viewed through the ethnographic lens afforded by the project, this portrait of young people mobilising is a less-reported dimension of the crisis. It underlines the need to revisit and reframe the pandemic as a period of continued social learning and adaptation for young people in the face of disruption to so many aspects of their lives. It shows the importance of 'being' as well as 'becoming' (Uprichard, 2008), recognising young people's active citizenship in the present, as well as weighing the future costs of their arrested development.

## Representing whom? Addressing intergenerational injustice

The project conveyed the frustration at the lack of meaningful dialogue with adult decision-makers, despite the far-reaching implications of the pandemic. Young people expressed deep concerns at the lack of young voices in decisions taken on their behalf by national government, at local and municipal levels, and by school leaders. Fundamentally, they wanted partnership and collaboration with adults, rather than arms-length consultation or a narrow compartmentalisation of their interests. At the first interim reporting stage, there had been little or no evidence of direct engagement with young people as a group through public forums relating to the management of the pandemic. By the end of the project, there were signs of more visible engagement – the SAGE committee forum with children and young people in the UK, and the launch of various large-scale surveys and studies. This had not translated into a sustained policy dialogue, however, and young people's research continued to highlight the challenge of under-representation of less heard groups.

Different traditions and cultures of participation were apparent from the interactions with young people through the project across seven countries. In particular, it was apparent how much young people's expectations were framed by the socio-political backdrop within their national context. In Lebanon, participation often had a more immediate 'everyday' resonance, in access to the internet or basic amenities, and longstanding civil rights issues had informed young people's views on political processes. In Italy, by way of contrast, civic participation was somewhat muted, and young people had generally lacked the opportunities for youth voice that have been mainstreamed within the UK through an active NGO sector and a longstanding tradition of youth participation. This had fuelled the Italian panel of young people to act on multiple fronts, including direct engagement with teachers, the mayor in their hometown, and to partner with a theatre company to communicate the messages from their research to a wide range of audiences.

While there were many commonalities in the outcomes that young people hoped to see, these cultural differences became apparent in how young people thought change should be achieved. Some of the more 'participation experienced' young people in the UK were wary of consultative forms of participation such as surveys and one-off events, whereas a greater need was perceived for these mechanisms in Italy where young people in the panel saw a need to establish lines of communication with adults in a position of decision-making responsibility – especially with their teachers and schools – as a necessary first step. In Lebanon, it was a desire to operate independently of government that had provided the impetus for more youth-led and community-based forms of participation and an interest among the young people in social entrepreneurship as an alternative route to empowerment in their country-specific recommendations.

## Access and entitlements in focus

The research particularly highlighted problems that young people encountered with access to services during the pandemic. The pace and scale of the 2020 lockdowns and social distancing measures left many cut-off from professional support, and highlighted strains within the system. This was especially so for clinical mental health services in the UK, which faced increased demand at a time when it was necessary to shift appointments and treatments online. This was managed with varying degrees of success and was followed by problems relating to a sharp rise in demand for clinical support after services re-opened.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and consistent with both other COVID-19 studies carried out with young people (Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Lundy, et. al., 2021), and prior research carried out in emergency situations (Save the Children, 2015; Ray 2010), education was one of the issues where young people were the most politicised and vocal. Irrespective of national education systems, young people understood and valued their right to education and were concerned about decisions that were being taken on their behalf that stood to influence their future. Levels of online access, the availability of teachers, and quality and quantity of education, as well as access to psychological support and counselling all came under close scrutiny in young people's appraisals of the pandemic response. They approached these issues from a strong ethical standpoint within the PAR, and with empathy and a sense of urgency in redressing the inequalities of those who had been left behind by the digital divide and as a consequence of policy decision-making.

Country differences were also apparent, of course. In Lebanon, technological infrastructure had a significant impact on young people's schooling during lockdown and was perceived to have left low socio-economic status families with minimal access to educational resources post school closure. This was in stark contrast to the situation in Singapore, where the public health and educational responses to an epidemic had been road-tested with SARS, and where young people generally described better preparedness for a switch to teaching online. For young people across the project, experiences of online

learning included both positives, such as flexibility and the acquisition of independent study skills; and negatives, deriving from wide variations in the quality of teaching resources, gaps in teacher assessment and feedback, and an overall sense that online teaching was being developed reactively rather than proactively by many schools. While young people were sympathetic during the early stages of the crisis, they did not always remain so where schools appeared to have no longer-term plan or leadership moving beyond the initial shocks in 2020.

## Restoring 'everyday' accountability for a post-COVID world

While the major policy decisions taken by governments were important to young people, the PAR reflected previous research in showing that it was often 'everyday' situations where participation made the most immediate difference to young people involved with the project (Percy-Smith, et. al, 2019).

The research painted a mixed picture of professional accountability at a time of crisis. Young people recalled where teachers, social workers and counsellors were resourceful and adaptive, finding ways to maintain one-to-one engagement even where schools were closed. Too often, however, young people felt that communication was at the discretion of individual professionals, with no obvious recourse if this was reduced significantly under the cover of lockdown. This presented challenges relating to trust and credibility when schools, health and youth services re-opened, and the onus shifted back onto young people to catch-up with missed schooling. In identifying recommendations from the project, young people wanted to find ways to ensure that the quality of their participation is not left to chance in future, strengthening the role of school councils and decision-making bodies, and setting expectations for student-teacher relationships.

### Living it!

## The role and value of Participatory Action Research

So, what value for a PAR-based methodology? There was no question that this played a central role in how evidence was generated, providing an opportunity for young people to document their lived experiences on their own terms and without a presumption of what might be conceived as relevant or important by adults, while also recognising the importance of a collaborative approach with professional researchers. Young people drew on their personal experiences, the situation of their peers and family members, and their wider research, to reach informed conclusions about the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. This work was carried out with curiosity, compassion and with a sense of concern about the social injustices that they found. While young people had often joined the project with specific priorities and causes in mind, the supportive group contexts within the project provided a forum for exchanging and re-presenting these experiences, alongside the findings from the individual research of other young people. This allowed for the co-

existence of issue-based individual research with a collective body of work drawn from across the different country panels.

Young people valued having a space to discuss and make sense of what was going on in their lives, and to exercise their citizenship in ways that were not always possible in other everyday contexts or in adult-led research. The social learning aspect of the work meant that the project was entwined with how young people were responding to the crisis, with a strong ethic of mutual care and support. Whereas at the outset, the emphasis was on reaching decision makers, the latter stages of the project shifted towards young people communicating the learning from the project more actively with their peers – sharing advice on maintaining self-care and wellbeing and sending messages of encouragement for others to find their voice. The adult researchers similarly reflected on how these spaces for dialogue with young people provided clarity and perspective during the crisis and learning from the exchanges.

There is certainly an important place for PAR within the field of youth research, during a period of uncertainty and misinformation, to counterbalance the plethora of COVID-19 statistics and surveys. Fundamentally, this project – alongside others – makes a compelling case for the more widespread use of PAR methods within the wider body of social research conducted with and about young people. It is hard to ignore the moral and ethical case for doing so, given the clear advantages not only for eliciting insights to social issues that are only made possible through lived experience, but also with reference to the personal, social and citizenship benefits of PAR, and its potential to give a voice to young people with diverse needs and circumstances.

## Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations provide a steer for four main groups of key stakeholders:

- a) young people
- b) governments and public authorities:
- c) schools, youth organisations and service providers, and
- d) broadcasters and the media.

These were developed and refined during the three cycles of the project in consultation between the adult and youth members of the project team. In the pages that follow, we set out each recommendation followed by personal reflections from young people, on what the recommendation means to them personally and what specific actions are needed.

# FOR YOUNG PEOPLE...

## #1

To recognise and value their right to be heard and to achieve meaningful social change, whether individually through volunteering, or collectively through membership of online and offline youth networks and movements, or creatives and cooperatives focussed on issues of importance to young people.

“ I think I would like to see more young people witnessing these changes and doing something about it, because as we know, we have a lot of avenues to make a difference through our Instagram or through social media, through our schools and the communities we are around.

I honestly think that we have become more aware, of what's going on around us. It's something that... I definitely hope won't go out of trend or won't become something that... people just forget about gradually.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ When it comes to protests, online protests, actual protests, private organisations which help the people in need. I feel like instead of relying on the government, young people have to take matters into their own hands”

(Female, 14, Lebanon)

“ Social media could be a means to express more young people's views, because that's the space we took over for ourselves, to have a voice at all. But so far, social media haven't spread young people's voice to the rest of society.”

(Male, 15, Italy)

“ A lot more people have been creating or joining non-profits and starting forums where they talk about stuff like this... saying, these are the ways that young people can make decisions. This is how we take charge of what's happening around us and we decide to make a change in our surroundings.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

# FOR GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES...

## #2

To ensure the representation of young people on central decision-making forums and committees overseeing the management of the pandemic at a government level, and engaging young people directly in evidence gathering, analysis, dialogue, planning, and formulation of National Recovery Plans.

“ I think the main thing is, first of all, making sure to communicate. Making sure you have a way to get [young people's] opinions, find out what they're worried about, get their suggestions, so that they're not just saying, 'We think young people are worried about X and Y, we'll fix this,' when we're really a bit worried about something else more so.”

(Female, 18, Northern Ireland)

“ [During the pandemic] young people went to the parliament, and they tried writing bills and rules. I felt that was quite interesting, but if that could be extended to a bigger group of people and not just a specific group in a specific school... maybe you could involve the whole school... making students know that it's okay for them to be aware about stuff.”

(Female, 16, Singapore)

“ As long as young people are included in decisions that affect them from the start, the middle, and the end, and then see what results - and then come back and feed back and see if it's made a difference, how much it's affected them.”

(Female, 17, Scotland)

“ Maybe if they know that there's a certain issue that's really impacting us, they could give us certain solutions that they had in mind, let us vote for them, or maybe we could suggest some more that we think that might benefit us more.

So if they're making a decision that will affect young people, government officials contact those young people who will then go and consult people in their borough, and then come back with feedback on what young people are thinking.”

(Female, 16, England)

## #3

**To review the representation of young people on established national or regional youth democratic participatory structures, to ensure that they actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they aim to serve, and to take action to draw a membership from grassroots organisations and groups, including those that work with vulnerable or marginalised young people.**

“ You have to get young people that weren't born here, they moved here, so they primarily speak another language, or they're just from somewhere else in the world and it was just culture shock to them.

You have to cover a lot of your bases: disabled young people, LGBTQ+ young people... people from rich areas and poor areas. It would be hard, but you can't just rule out an entire group of people because it's easier, which I think is what they kind of did.”

(Female, 15, Scotland)

“ A lot of families are falling into poverty because their parents are losing their jobs, their kids are losing control of their studies... I think that in that sense, currently, the government might not have paid enough attention to those people.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ Try and talk to as many young people of different ages and different backgrounds as you can, so then you get more of a broader understanding of the different things that people go through. It's more representative. By doing that, that's the best option I think in terms of recovery.”

(Female, 17, England)

“ On the whole, policy decisions are what are really needed to help improve the lives of queer people in Singapore, but this is a double-edged sword because it requires public sentiment to be evoked and for the public to feel extremely strongly for the cause in order for it to finally reach the top tiers of lawmaking.

Therefore, more queer voices need to be amplified, enabling the sharing of queer experiences more freely. Members of the community and allies need to make efforts to carve out more seats at decision-making tables or public forums.”

(Female, 17, Singapore)

## #4

**To establish national minimum standards, setting out and ensuring effective communication of young people's educational entitlements following the COVID-19 pandemic; to establish monitoring mechanisms, and to consider instituting new policies or legislative measures where necessary to ensure that standards are met.**

“ Increase some form of interactions for teachers to check in on students to ensure that they are doing well, and they are coping well with whatever situations that they might be facing at home or at school.”

(Male, 17, Singapore)

“ The primary thing that I would say would be just clear instructions and a clear mandate on what schools are going to be, and just us to be able to actually know what the next phase of our life is going to look like. I think that would go miles.”

(Female, 18, England)

“ I think people have sort of left the young people to the schools, but... schools are equipped so differently and that's probably the biggest issue. It's like being told to run a race, but everyone's at different starting points. Some people are that far from the finish line already and others are miles behind for various different reasons, be that having technology or their family situation or even where they live.”

(Female, 18, England)

“ There could be regulations or policies, or guidelines based on how schools should be delivering online teaching and online learning, and it isn't just up to individual teachers to do as they're pleasing.

It needs to ensure there's a number of contact hours, a minimum number, that there is feedback being given on adequate standards, that there are opportunities to ask questions, that there is different resources being utilised and making it an equal playing field.”

(Male, 18, Northern Ireland)

“ Students, especially those graduating, have not experienced any substantial improvements in infrastructures or exam preparation. Therefore, despite a situation of social distance leading to isolation, most students have teamed up to request more information and guidelines from the Ministry of Education.”

(Male, 17, Italy)



# #5

**To independently evaluate schools' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, establishing the range of measures taken and their sufficiency; to appraise the relative effectiveness of educational, welfare and safeguarding measures adopted during the crisis, and publish and disseminate the findings.**

“ I think the government needs to make sure that, ... regardless of whether there's a second wave or not, they collect the information of students who might need extra resources during these times. Just in case, for an emergency.

God forbid if something like this were to happen again, they know exactly which students to cater, to make sure that these students have not just the resources for themselves, but for their family and the environment around them, so that they can study and be okay if something happened.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ Another way could be to conduct a survey across households with young people, to understand what their situation is. This could be another way to make young people feel included and inform the government about their sentiments.”

(Male, 14, Italy)

“ Every school can write a paper including every class's opinions, or every class problems that they faced doing online learning, or during... other problems that they may face, and this written paper, they should collect it from all the schools in Lebanon and go to the government.”

(Male, 17, Lebanon)

“ Maybe they could send out questionnaires for us to fill, see how satisfied we are with certain aspects of government policy... Maybe if they know that there's a certain issue that's really impacting us, they could give us solutions that they had in mind, let us vote for them, or maybe we could suggest some more that we think that might benefit us more.

I think that would be really useful in terms of just having some sort of contact with the government, having our voices heard.”

(Female, 15, England)

## #6

**To review the availability and access to mental health and wellbeing services for young people in a post-COVID context, to include consideration of the role and capacity of school-based counselling and therapeutic services and support and to share good practices regarding online support for mental health and wellbeing.**

“ A lot of us maybe are feeling different things that we don't know how to explain to our parents or our friends. I think there should be more mental health resources that are made free and available. Things that some can access without having to tell their parents because it tends to be a stigma that's attached to, if you are seeking therapy then you have to tell everyone around you.”

(Male, 15, Singapore)

“ A lot of people I know... go to school to get away from a family drama that they may be having. I think that in order to make that a bit better, they could be given [more frequent] breaks... to be away from everything else.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ There needs to be more emphasis on the creative aspects of receiving help and using it as a coping mechanism... a lot more of a choice of what young people see as mental health support. By creating the practices ourselves [young people can] change the policy from our experiences.”

(Male, 16, England)

“ The government should be providing more money for the schools. So maybe they can spend it on like counsellors and things like that... universal mental health training for teachers.”

(Male, 16, England)

“ Young people being trained to facilitate discussions around mental health, where to go and come up with new coping techniques for fellow peers. It's now important now more than ever to remove the stigma and get young people in meetings to come up with creative and effective solutions to aid the COVID recovery.”

(Anon.)

“ My school has introduced a help desk for students who need someone to talk to, since not everybody can receive this kind of support from family. It has been a great resource for us, and I think it would be really helpful if all schools provided support figures, such as psychologists/therapists, so that young people could have a safe place for them when they are struggling with their mental health or simply need someone who can listen to them.”

(Female, 15, England)

“ Overall, I think more pre-empting of the issue [of young people's mental health] needs to be done, which means that measures should be in place that are consistent, targeted and effective in the long run. These include:

- 1) More training for counselors regarding serious mental illnesses and who/how to refer the youth to, in the event of symptoms that point to such illnesses, because I have heard from peers and friends, and have experienced personally, instances when the counselor is either unable to, or points the person down a wrong path.
- 2) School talks need to go beyond the typical mental health illnesses that are shown (e.g., anxiety, depression, eating disorders etc.), and instead place emphasis on centering it on students' experiences. These include:
  - a. talking more about body image issues, and lesser-known mental health illnesses/symptoms of such conditions.
  - b. more trigger warnings during talks and handling the topic with greater sensitivity.
  - c. hosting more town hall type events.
- 3) Mental health resources need to be more well-managed
- 4) Hotlines... have not helped callers, or in some cases, made the situation worse for callers. Hence, they must ensure that they:
  - a. reduce, or stop, putting callers on hold as they could be in precarious situations and may require immediate help (if being put on hold cannot be helped, it could be useful to explain why the caller was put on hold).
  - b. volunteers must be better trained such that the information dispensed is reliable and professional
  - c. mental healthcare needs to be more affordable – especially for at-risk youth, or youth in situations where they need help but cannot rely on their parents for it.
  - d. cheaper options are normally hotlines, but they inevitably refer callers to IMH services or private practitioners, neither of which is typically inexpensive.

(Male, 15, Singapore)



# #1

**To make a step change in how digital technologies are used within education, looking beyond the immediate crisis to tackle issues of connectivity, access to tech in schools and households, and to invest in digital skills for teachers and young people, being bold and creative to get the best out of tech for learning, wellbeing and inclusion.**

“ So many young people had issues with home schooling due to technical problems, including lack of internet connection, and there wasn't much they could do about it. These families should receive some more economic support; if you only have one computer at home, and your mum needs it to work from home, obviously her job takes precedence.”

(Female, 16, Italy)

“ The decisions taken to give people, to hand out iPads and tablets - I think they should be doing this on a regular basis, and they should make sure that having a tablet or a device, an electronic device with you in school, is no longer a status symbol, but it's more something that everyone has in the digital age.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ If you're going to have blended [learning], if you're going to have online, we need to make sure that people who have disabilities, whether it's hearing loss, whether it's their eyesight or anything, how they actually are being taught. If you have someone who's blind, giving them notes isn't going to do anything. How are you actually teaching them?”

(Female, 18, Northern Ireland)

“ It could be beneficial for teachers, we could suggest some ideas for their professional development, especially because teachers themselves wanted students' help to understand how to use technology. But that has to go through some process to provide suggestions and a voice for young people, and I don't think that's going to happen based purely on teachers' initiative.”

(Female, 15, Singapore)

“ They haven't actually fully utilised this, the iPads, the technology that we have... there's not really [been] an increase in solutions.”

(Female, 16, Singapore)

# FOR SCHOOLS, YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS...

## #8

To create a school environment which values 'everyday' opportunities for dialogue between professionals and students about their needs and rights for their education and wellbeing during the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, while ensuring that decisions are taken with young people, and that follow-up actions are transparent.

## #9

**To facilitate young people to create and oversee peer support and self-help forums with regard to coping and thriving during and beyond the pandemic, including support for study groups, wellbeing, and service-user forums.**

# FOR BROADCASTERS AND THE MEDIA...

## #10

To redress imbalances in the portrayal of young people during the pandemic, with more young people in journalistic and reporting roles, greater visibility of young people from diverse ages and backgrounds, and a celebration of young people's civic and social actions during the pandemic through personal stories.



# ANNEX ONE: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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# ANNEX TWO: METHODOLOGY

## Study Framework

### Theoretical influences

The project was designed around a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, involving cycles of inquiry and reflection with young people and stakeholders sharing and critically reflecting on stories and perspectives from experience (Reason and Bradbury 2001; Percy-Smith et al. 2019; Ray 2010), and to develop new decisions and actions. It was youth-centred, and rights-based at all times, acknowledging young people as citizens and rights-bearers, in accordance with the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. As the research took place at a time of social restrictions, the project was carried out entirely online, taking influences from digital ethnography (Skågeby, 2011) to adapt to circumstances during the crisis.

The research aimed to understand the dynamic interaction between COVID-19 and young people in terms of multiple layers of contextual influence that play out in their lives – their family, peers, community, socio-structural position, political economy and virtual worlds (Bronfenbrenner 1979). We did not set out to conduct an international comparative study per se. Rather, the sample frame aimed to reflect the global nature of the pandemic, and the ways in which individual experience is mediated through a “constellation of environments and relationships” (Earls and Carlson, 2001). In the specific study context, these constellations are enriched by the varied national political and cultural contexts providing the backdrop for action research.

### Target groups / population

The project aimed to engage, recruit and support young people aged 14-18 years as direct participants in the research process, in accordance with their capacities and capabilities. The focus of the research extended beyond this, however, to consider the situation for family members, siblings, peers, and commentary on the impacts of young people in society. The sample frame operated at two levels:

- a) a selection of seven countries, applying a set of framing criteria (below), and
- b) a selection of individual participants within these countries.

The project was run through panels of young people, who were engaged and supported throughout the study. In total, 70 participant action researchers were recruited and supported – comprising virtual groups of 10 young people per country, with the exception of the UK where the adult researchers worked with 10 young people in each home nation (an increased sample reflecting the Foundation’s priorities). These numbers facilitated working collaboratively with the participants both individually and in groups to implement an action research process with fidelity and ensure the rigour of the outputs.

### Country selection

The study involved seven countries – the UK (including the four nations), Italy, Singapore and Lebanon. Our rationale for adding a transnational dimension was threefold:

- to reflect on the global nature of the COVID-19 public health emergency
- to learn from diverse contexts beyond the UK; and
- to establish a dialogue between children and young people, beyond the narrower frame of national cultures of participation.

The research team pre-selected countries to reflect contextual differences in the political and cultural backdrop to the crisis; varying public health responses; and different cultures with regard to fundamental rights and political representation. These criteria are summarised below:

#### UK

- Geographical (Sub)region: Western Europe.
- Political economy: liberal democracy, high income but high inequality.
- Child rights: varied and inconsistent position.

#### Italy

- Geographical (Sub)region: Southern Europe.
- Political economy: liberal democracy, high income.
- Child rights: strong national political culture of child rights and representation.

#### Singapore

- Geographical (Sub)region: Southeast Asia
- Political economy: authoritarian democracy, high income.
- Child rights: overall high levels of child wellbeing, moderate levels of youth activism.

#### Lebanon

- Geographical (Sub)region: West Asia / MENA
- Political economy: authoritarian, middle income.
- Child rights: recent history of youth protest and civil unrest.
-

### Time periods covered

The study covered the following time periods, vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Retrospective** – young people’s recall of circumstances prior to the crisis, as a basis for understanding what has changed and how, and to locate their agency within this.
- **Short-term** – the immediate public health emergency and its different phases.
- **Medium-term** – the transition beyond lockdown (or equivalent arrangements), as restrictions are lifted, and arrangements return to ‘normal’.
- **Long-term** – hopes and aspirations for the future, recommendations for policy and practice measures that are needed for future crises, safeguarding child rights beyond COVID-19.

### Topic framework

The study was underpinned by a preliminary framework of themes and topics, which reflected the theoretical influences of being child-centred and rights-based. An iterative approach was taken to build upon and refine this set. Three waves of data collection, analysis and reflection facilitated continuous review and adjustment, and helped to capture and reflect upon emerging topics.

**Key themes (1) – implications of Covid-19 for young people's lives****1. Family**

- family roles and relationships
- family routines and traditions
- emotional support and caregiving
- privacy and personal space

**3. Work and income**

- work, remuneration and family responsibilities
- financial or material support
- poverty and hardship

**5. Education**

- schooling and educational resources
- formal and non-formal learning (incl. validation of learning under lockdown)
- parental engagement in education

**7. Identity and freedom of expression**

- outlets for personal or creative expression (culture, music, art)
- observation of religious or cultural practices
- political expression during the crisis

**9. Crosscutting themes**

- Mobility and freedom of movement
- Spaces and environments (e.g. learning, social or digital environments)
- Gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and faith
- Vulnerability and disadvantage

**2. Friends and peer relationships**

- leisure activities
- friendship groups and personal and social networks
- intimate relationships

**4. Access to services**

- access to food, medicines, sanitation and other essentials
- access to professional support
- access to information

**6. Health and wellbeing**

- physical health and exercise
- social and emotional wellbeing
- health-related vulnerabilities and their impact
- personal safety

**8. Civic and social participation**

- Getting out
- informal support within local neighbourhoods
- participation in organised activities (e.g. youth councils, NGOs, or fund-raising activities)
- Helping others

**Key themes (2) – young people’s social commentary and recommendations**

- 3) Young people’s perspectives of emergency measures taken – perceived sufficiency of the speed and type of actions by government and other public authorities: school closures / re-opening, social distancing, restrictions placed on mobility and privacy (e.g. contact tracing, punitive measures).
- 4) Views on impacts for young people as a group within society – perceived social justice and fairness (e.g. trade-offs between young people’s education and public health); intended or unintended consequences for young people of emergency legislation; concerns about groups who are vulnerable within society and / or who’s voices have been overlooked.
- 5) Commentary on societal values, attitudes and behaviours – perceptions of mainstream and social media coverage of the pandemic and how young people are portrayed; reliability of information; unexpected positive consequences of the crisis (e.g. reduced travel and carbon emissions, community support, collective responsibility and acts of kindness).
- 6) Future proofing – learning from the Covid-19 crisis for safeguarding child rights in future emergency situations: actions needed at municipal, national or global scales; views on spending priorities for recovery after the crisis – economic, public health, welfare and social justice, and mechanisms to ensure that young people have a voice.

## Method Summary

The project started with an inception stage (April to June 2020), led by the Principal Investigator and Co-Applicant. The main tasks included drafting the ethical protocol, development of a project plan, sampling, coding framework and research tools. Researchers undertook desk research covering the latest policy documentation and media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis within each of the selected countries.

### Panel recruitment

Participant recruitment involved social media, and direct contact with NGOs, public authorities, forums / youth councils, and organisations representing specific groups (e.g. young carers). The study team purposefully sought to recruit diverse groups of young people between 14 and 18 years, with attention to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), family structure and health conditions, as well as groups facing specific disadvantages (e.g. LGBTQ+, care leavers, and children in care). We were mindful that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and the interplay between social context, public health discourses and vulnerability was central to understanding the implications of the crisis for children and young people's rights.

After young people had been shortlisted, researchers held one-to-one calls to complete a risk assessment and to establish that they were able to take part safely. The panel(s) of young people then joined a series of online meetings to provide orientation, establish the dynamic within the group and to complete initial training in research methods and ethics. The study team provided PAR guidance and a toolkit with a selection of ideas and resources. These included examples relating to methods such as observation, interviewing, diary-based methods, and visual methods (Thomson, 2008) such as photography, art, and videography.

### Conducting the PAR

Once underway, the PAR comprised of individual participant-led research, using a mix of discourse analysis, observations, informal conversations and formal interviews with peers and family members. The approach was youth-led, and young people differed in the extent to which they selected formal or informal methods, or a combination of the two. Some young people also kept a research diary, and made drawings and notes to record thoughts, feelings and experiences about life during the COVID-19 crisis.

The individual research was coupled with groupwork, centring around the monthly meetings within the country panels (via Skype initially, and then Teams). These were supported by an adult researcher. Ongoing communication within the groups was managed through

Yammer, a web-based platform that allowed young people to post views and offer peer support on an ongoing basis within a safe and moderated space. Cross-panel meetings were held periodically, involving young people from all participating countries.

The main stage of PAR was organised around three cycles of data collection, analysis and reporting:

- **July-October 2020:** The first cycle of PAR tracked the summer 2020 lockdowns through to the autumn school term within the participating countries. Young people progressed their individual research, country panel meetings, and considered the ways in which public authorities and society responded to the emergency. This cycle finished with a set of semi-structured one-to-one interviews (n=62), which were carried out confidentially, transcribed, coded using framework (in NVivo), and analysed. Full details of the methodology and findings are provided within the [first interim study report](#).
- **November 2020–June 2021:** The young people continued with their individual activities during the second cycle of PAR, with an intensification of the group work as the panels grew in confidence and became more outward looking. This work included external collaborations with a theatre company, meetings with public authority figures, and guest sessions where the panels engaged with teachers and other professionals. The young people also co-ran a public webinar: [Young People Speak Out](#) in spring 2021. The cycle finished with a set of country update reports; short reflective reports with a main focus on the situation in the seven countries included in the study. .
- **July 2021–November 2021:** The third and final cycle of PAR was primarily dissemination-focussed. Young people finalised their individual research; some panels opted to produce a collective output such as a video, blog or short report, and young people were engaged in planning, writing and reviewing the final report. The adult researchers presented the interim findings at the ESA conference 2021.

### Data analysis and interpretation

Data collection, analysis and sense-making was conducted on an ongoing basis as an iterative process. An initial framework of themes and codes was developed at the outset, mapped to the study research questions (see tables presented in this section). The framework was tested and adjusted as the study developed to incorporate new and emerging themes. The project team used NVivo qualitative software to facilitate data management, incorporating transcripts, photographic and diary-based evidence, and manual notes.

Analysis was undertaken both within and between countries, using thematic templates (King, 1988). Triangulation between the qualitative focus groups and interviews, Yammer extracts, photographic and diary outputs supported an understanding of young people's perceptions, beliefs and behaviours in response to the crisis and built a picture of patterns and trends in different contexts. The emerging findings were developed by and with young people; synchronously, through analysis sessions using Padlet as a tool to explore key themes, and asynchronously through written and verbal feedback from the panels and at the cross-panel meetings prior to the main reporting points.

Alongside the published reports, case studies, blogposts and podcasts, photos, diary excerpts and written findings were disseminated on an ongoing basis through the [project website](#), and posted on social media.

### **Data limitations and caveats**

As with any study, data limitations apply, which should be considered when reading this report. In this instance, the gender composition of the young people participating as co-researchers was skewed towards girls and young women (46 female, 22 male and 2 non-binary). Whilst every attempt was made to achieve an equitable representation, the final decision about selection of participants was determined by a desire to ensure a variety of social, personal and contextual characteristics. This inevitably affected the gender mix.

As this was a qualitative study, young people's views are not taken to be representative of options among the wider youth population in the countries where they live. Rather, cultural and national identity are two of many different contextual factors shaping young people's experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. The recruitment process meant that young people were identified and engaged on the basis of having the interest and commitment to join a PAR project running over more than a year. It would fair to infer that levels of interest in social and political issues were higher than would have been the case with a random cross-section of 14- to 18-year-olds. The range of views and recommendations expressed by young people within the report and the other study outputs should be considered in this context.

The findings reflect the specific phases in the pandemic, and young people's insights covered the period from the onset of the crisis up until January 2022. The majority of panel activities were completed in autumn 2021, and events concerning the pandemic after this time are largely out of scope for the analysis.





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