Growing up under Covid-19

June 2021 Group Summary – UK panel

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Since the onset of the pandemic, young researchers in our group have been reflecting on their ongoing experiences through journaling, keeping diaries, interviewing family/peers, surveying key workers, writing podcast scripts and making presentations or illustrations. This report sets out what they found and what they believe to be the most important aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic to manage for young people, based on their research and their own lived experiences. We present our findings as key messages and recommendations for policymakers and authority figures across the UK.

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Key message 1: More decisive and consistent leadership

Within the group, many young researchers reported experiencing **highly stressful situations** during the most recent lockdown and possible reasons emerged that were linked to managing one's school life amid a situation that was constantly changing. Young people that were interviewed by researchers within the group reported being told they would have mock exams at the start of 2021, which were then cancelled, then re-instated at two weeks' notice and given weighting towards final grades.

> *"They [the UK government] flip-flopped a lot. I feel like they were very unclear with what they were going to do in advance. It all seemed very unpredictable."*
> ~ Young researcher

> *"There was a horrendous amount of clarity missing from nearly every instruction we received for exams and for going back to school. Young people all over the UK were confused. Authority figures just have not been clear about their handling of this crisis."*
> ~ Young researcher

This **'moving of the goalposts'** was linked to subdued motivation, stress and mental health concerns. Many young researchers felt the changes made it difficult for them to **plan for the future** and reduced their **motivation** to work towards their various educational qualifications, in the absence of **clear deadlines**.

They acknowledged the challenges associated with managing effective national educational assessments during a Covid-19 crisis with fluctuating infection rates and changing social distancing restrictions. However, a consensus was reached within the group that a **decisive**, **early course of action**, whatever it was, would have been preferable to constant changes. Young researchers expressed a hope that leaders in each home nation would set out a **clear plan** for next year's educational assessments, and would **resist temptations** to amend this plan further down the line.

Studying for A-Level exams during the pandemic, as reported by a young researcher in Northern Ireland:

The initial proposal for exams in Northern Ireland (NI) was a 'reduced assessment burden' approach. The Northern Ireland Education Minister Peter Weir stated that A-Level and GCSE students would undergo exams in the same format as previous years, but students would be examined on only 40% of the specification's content. For a significant number of A-levels, one module would be examined which meant therefore that **one exam for each A-Level would be taken.** At this point in time, exams were set to go ahead.

However, in January 2021 as cases surged and Northern Ireland entered its third lockdown, the education minister announced that given the new circumstances NI's GCSE and A-Level exams **would not go ahead**. The approach that was ultimately used instead was **teachers' professional assessments** based on evidence collected of student's performance standards. However, with this flexibility came reduced standardisation and so it became harder for schools to determine the best way to collect sufficient and robust evidence and for students to anticipate what they would need to be ready to be examined on. The result of this meant that many students ended up doing multiple assessments and that assessments occurred much earlier than the originally proposed A-Level exams.

Key message 2: Raise standards and accountability for education and healthcare settings

Young researchers reported observing that the most recent phase of the pandemic has continued **to exacerbate inequalities** between schools, colleges and universities. Many expressed concerns about this, citing a government study that found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have fallen further behind their wealthier peers.

An important theme emerged around the flexibility granted to schools and universities in terms of how they met student's educational entitlements and conducted assessments. Young researchers felt that **standardisation** – a fundamental principle upon which the national education system is based – was reduced during this most recent phase of the pandemic. They were concerned that young people reliant on educational settings that did not respond and adapt adequately to the 'new normal' would suffer more than they would have done without Covid-19.

They observed that many students were being left to **fend for themselves** in their university applications, having been granted very little access to teachers and not being able to visit the university campuses. Students at university who were interviewed by the young researchers reported that resources provided by their institution were confusing at best and non-existent at worst and that communication from the university was not satisfactory.

> *"We get told absolutely nothing and have access to a fifth of the resources previous years have been able to access without any kind of fee reduction."*
> ~ Student interviewed by young researcher

There were also concerns around the **treatment of students** living in university accommodation. Despite assuring prospective students in 2020 that adequate provisions would be made for them, it emerged that many universities had **failed** to put an adequate support system in place for students living in their accommodation facilities.

> *"At the start of the first term, if we had to self-isolate the university would only provide us with food if we paid £17 a day. They seemed to believe that we'd be able to find people to drop food off for us, conveniently forgetting that we hadn't really had a chance to make friends outside of our flat. Students had to fork out for supermarket deliveries that nobody on a student budget would ever really be able to afford."*
> ~ Young researcher

In addition to socioeconomic and educational inequalities, researchers also picked up on inequalities that were related to health and ethnic background. They found that Covid-19 death rates were higher among black and other ethnic minority ethnic groups in the UK, due partly to unequal access to health care and other services.

With this in mind, a consensus was reached that **national minimum standards** for healthcare and educational settings are necessary, as well as independent **evaluation and appraisal** to ensure that standards are met universally. In order to minimise inequalities, the young researchers advised the UK government to **invest in providing equal access** to
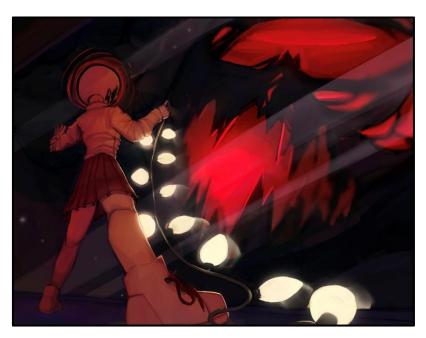
healthcare and education in all communities and also to increase funding towards preventative health public services, such as vaccinations, cancer screenings and cholesterol tests.

Key message 3: Emphasise mental health

Young researchers identified **detrimental effects** of the pandemic on young people's **mental health.** Key reasons identified were increased **social isolation** and **disruptions to education**.

"All of my existing problems were just exacerbated- in normal circumstances, with my friends around me, I'd be able to cope, but in total isolation, I've had no support bubble and everything has been so much worse."
~ Student interviewed by young researcher

Young people living in university accommodation emerged as particularly vulnerable to suffering mental health issues. One young researcher's reflections on their own experience and interviews with fellow students indicated that living in university accommodation brought conflicting pressures to socialise and make new friends whilst also placing responsibilities to isolate on students who are often living on their own for the first time. A theme also emerged related to the lack of sympathy attributed to the plight of this year's cohort of university students.

"Being put into a completely new city, not being able to interact with it at all… it's not fun. You feel really isolated even though you know there's so many people on campus. You can't interact with any of them… All I get is a constant stream of 'they'll all be deferring or at home anyway', 'they know the risk of coming here', 'they're ill anyway'. It's like people think their lives are less valuable than ours."
~ Young researcher

Despite these pressures, young people reported that mental health services in general have been so overwhelmed that they have been directing enquiries to generic, mindfulness-based online resources, that were **viewed as inadequate** to treat the symptoms commonly experienced by young people. Young researchers also identified a **mental battle** that young people suffer through when accessing mental health support.

"You invalidate your own feelings because you're constantly told that everyone's in the same boat, so you feel like you don't have any right to waste their [support services] time by asking for help".
~ Student interviewed by Young researcher

With this in mind, the young researchers agreed that the availability and access to mental health and wellbeing services for young people needs to be reviewed and expanded in a post-COVID context.

Key message 4: Balance media narratives

Young researchers acknowledged that the media is a useful and widely drawn-upon source of information regarding the pandemic, but found the sheer **volume of negative information** published by the media to be distressing. Some young researchers observed that the constant negative coverage of the pandemic had burdened and withered young people.

"I hear my family reacting to them [negative news stories], I hear my friends reacting to them, and suddenly you have this huge quantity of really dark information that you just have nothing to do with. Now I know the ICUs are crowded and people are dying at a terrifying rate, what do I do with this? I can't have any joy in this now I know all this stuff."

~ Young researcher

A consensus was reached not only to redress negative imbalances in the portrayal of young people specifically (as recommended in the first report) but also to redress negative imbalances in the **overall** coverage of the pandemic.

"It's human nature to want to see it, even though it makes us upset. It would be better if the media could focus on more positive stories."

~ Young researcher

Key message 5: Embrace technology to reduce isolation

Some young researchers felt the worst aspect of the pandemic was the isolation caused by the social distancing rules. However, they also observed how the pandemic had catalysed the **rapid development of technologies** and science. They questioned whether the government had done enough to harness recent technological developments specifically to reduce isolation and help young people keep in contact with their friends and family. They reported observing limitations in the UK's existing **broadband infrastructure** and lamented previous failures by the UK government to invest in its development.

> *"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 their friends online."*
>
> ~ Young researcher

As such, a consensus was reached that more government efforts should be directed towards ensuring that available technologies **achieve their potential** to reduce loneliness and isolation.