

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND COVID-19

Implications of the Covid-19 crisis for educational inequality

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About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.

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Introduction

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are far reaching and are likely to impact on practically every area of government policy for a long time to come. The policy landscape is shifting rapidly, with changes coming not in days or weeks but often in hours. This briefing covers the Sutton Trust's immediate concerns, based on the information available, looking at how the crisis is likely to impact the most disadvantaged young people through their time in education and into the workplace. It includes immediate areas of concern which will need quick action from policymakers, as well as areas which will need further research in the coming weeks and months. In the longer term, the economic impact is likely to have a profound impact on social mobility, with the damage caused leading to fewer job opportunities, which will in turn likely fuel greater inequality of opportunity.

This paper covers the impacts on social mobility of the current crisis across the Trust's priority areas:

- Early Years
- Schools
- Apprenticeships
- Higher Education (including access to university and student finance)
- Access to the Workplace

As the crisis progresses, the Trust will be releasing research looking at these challenges in greater detail, as well as offering concrete policy recommendations on how best to lessen the impacts of the pandemic on social mobility.

For the present, our policy focus is on:

- *Widening access to private and online tuition*, both during and after the school closures, in order to minimise the impact on the attainment gap.
- *Ensuring access to technology and online resources* for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds while schools are closed.
- *Fair access to higher education*, and making sure this year's changes to A levels and the admissions process do not impact negatively on the prospects of young people from less well-off backgrounds
- *Protecting apprenticeships*, making sure that current apprentices are protected financially, and trying to ensure that the apprenticeship system is ready to bounce back when restrictions are lifted.

Early years

Early years education is a crucial stage for social mobility, with the poorest children already 11 months behind their better-off peers before they even start at school.¹ Quality early years settings provide an important educational opportunity to narrow the attainment gap, as well as providing vital support to working families requiring childcare. However, the crisis presents several considerable challenges for the sector in both the short and long term.

Financial pressures on early year settings

A large proportion of early years provision is in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, providing 77% of registered childcare places in early years settings.² Even before the current crisis, many of the PVI settings were already facing financial difficulties, leaving them particularly vulnerable to this economic shock.

The government has taken action to help these providers: for example, they will continue to receive funding from local authorities for the free entitlements for two, three and four-year-olds, even in the event settings are closed.³ And while not originally included in the government's business rate holiday, it has since been extended to cover these organisations.⁴ Providers can also furlough staff if they are closed, but many should still be open in some capacity to look after the children of key workers.

However, there will be lost payments from parents above and beyond the entitlements the government will continue to provide - payments which many early education settings need to survive, and which are often filling gaps resulting from the low hourly rates of government funding. Additionally, some providers are more reliant on parental contributions than others. For example, 1 in 10 group-based providers (the term used to cover providers not including schools or childminders) do not offer the 30-hour entitlement,⁵ so will not be able to receive as much financial support from local authorities as those offering both the 15- and 30-hour entitlements.

We do not currently know how many providers will be at risk of closure due to this crisis, and more information on this is urgently needed, so that support can be put in place to ensure providers can re-open in future so that there is adequate overall provision, especially in the most disadvantaged communities.

¹ K. Stewart & J. Waldfogel (2017) Closing Gaps Early. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/closing-gaps-early-parenting-policy-childcare/>

² Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers: Main Summary, England (2019) Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/845080/SCEYP_2019_Main_Report_Nov19.pdf - Note: This figure excludes places provided by childminders.

³ Free childcare offers to continue during coronavirus closures. (2020) Gov.uk Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-childcare-offers-to-continue-during-coronavirus-closures>

⁴ Coronavirus: 'The future of our nursery is pretty bleak' (2020) BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-51966152>

⁵ S. Speight, T. Basi, L. Marshall & G. Paull (2019) 30 Hours Free Childcare: Evidence from the Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers 2018. Department for Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/789959/SCEYP_30_hours_report_March2019.pdf

Differences in parental engagement and the home learning environment

Previous Sutton Trust research has shown the importance of the home learning environment for children from all socio-economic backgrounds.⁶ With settings closed, the home learning environment and parental engagement will be more important than ever. Making sure parents from all backgrounds have the right support, which is helpful but not prescriptive (given the challenges many families are facing during this time), could help to reduce the impact of differences in the home learning environment between children from different backgrounds. The Sutton Trust, in partnership with the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, have previously undertaken extensive work on parental engagement through the Parental Engagement Fund,⁷ which aims to increase attainment for disadvantaged children in the early years through the development of more effective parental engagement. Using this expertise, the Trust has put together guidance for parents, including links to high quality online resources, to support them during this period.⁸

Widening of the attainment gap

There is a considerable risk that the crisis will further open up the early years' attainment gap in both the short and the long term. In the short term, having providers temporarily closed is likely to have the biggest impact on the poorest children, who benefit most from structure provision and are less likely to have the suitable home learning environment needed. This could also have a long term impact if providers do not receive enough support and are forced to close permanently, and provision is slow to recover once the health crisis passes.

⁶ E. Washbrook & J. Waldfogel (2010) Low income and early cognitive development in the UK. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/low-income-early-cognitive-development-u-k/>

⁷ N. Eisenstadt (2016) Engaging parents. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/engaging-parents/>

⁸ L. Barbour (2020) The home learning environment has never been more important. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/home-learning/>

Schools

The closure of schools is likely to have a considerable impact for all pupils,⁹ but the largest impact is likely to fall on those from the poorest families. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are already twice as likely to leave formal education without GCSEs in English and maths compared to their better-off classmates.¹⁰ We already know that time away from school, for example during the summer holidays, widens this gap.¹¹ Furthermore, due to the ongoing economic crisis caused by the pandemic, many more families will be facing other challenges which indirectly impact on attainment, such as increased poverty and food insecurity.

Access to resources for online learning

With schools closed, access to the resources needed for online learning will be important for all children, but especially so for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These young people are less likely to have access to additional activities and support at home, so are likely to rely more on any online provision provided by their schools.

But to be able to access online learning, students need to have the necessary technology, including a computer or tablet, as well as an internet connection with adequate data allowances. But previous Sutton Trust research found that just over a third (34%) of parents with children aged 5-16 reported their child does not have access to their own computer, laptop or tablet that they can use to access the internet on at home.¹² These children will also need a suitable space in which to study, something likely to be difficult for many poor children who live in cramped housing conditions.¹³

Looking at ways to ensure all children can access online learning, including providing access to the required resources, will be important in the coming months to minimise the impact of this crisis on the attainment gap. Possible solutions may include a fund from government, businesses or charity to help to supply children with the necessary equipment. Moves from broadband providers to lift data caps and provide lower priced tariffs are welcome,¹⁴ but efforts may be needed to ensure all families are aware that this is available, and even very low tariff offers may still not be affordable for those facing significant financial difficulties. Some schools have also been working to provide hard copy versions of resources to their students. While this work is welcome, it is unlikely to be able to make up fully for a lack of access to online resources.

Private tuition

Many of the parents able to do so are likely to make use of private tuition in the coming months, to reduce the impact of school closures on their own children. This is understandable, but also has the

⁹ S. Burgess & H. Henrik Sievertsen (2020) Schools, skills and learning: The impact of COVID-19 on Education. VOX. Available at: <https://voxeu.org/article/impact-covid-19-education>

¹⁰ The Attainment Gap 2017 (2018) Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018.pdf

¹¹ H. Stewart, N. Watson & M. Campbell (2018) The cost of school holidays for children from low income families. *Childhood*, 25 (4), 516-529. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0907568218779130>

¹² C. Cullinane & R. Montacute (2018) Pay as you go? Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/>

¹³ D. Garvie (2020) Self-isolation? Try it as a homeless family living in one room. Shelter. Available at: <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2020/03/self-isolation-try-it-as-a-homeless-family-living-in-one-room/>

¹⁴ Broadband providers to lift data caps during Covid-19 lockdown. (2020) The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/broadband-providers-to-lift-data-caps-during-covid-19-lockdown>

potential to further open-up attainment gaps. Tuition is known to be an effective intervention,¹⁵ but students from poorer backgrounds are less able to access this type of support. Previous Sutton Trust research has found that while just over a third (34%) of students from richer homes have had tutoring, just 20% of those from poorer homes have done so.¹⁶ Access to online resources, as outlined above, may also pose a challenge for poorer families trying to access tutoring online.

The Trust has previously called on more private tuition agencies to provide a certain proportion of their tuition to disadvantaged pupils for free, as well as an expansion of non-profit and state tuition programmes that connect tutors with disadvantaged schools. We have also highlighted the work of agencies with innovative models in this area, such as MyTutor and Tutor Trust. Taking steps to increase access to private tuition for lower income students, through wider use of these models, or increasing central funding through a voucher scheme or a national coordinated effort, will be more important than ever in the coming months, both to mitigate the impact of current closures and to help poorer children catch up next academic year (see below). The Trust is working closely with its sister charity, the Education Endowment Foundation, in this area. If any private tuition companies are interested in working with the Trust to help to open up access, please get in contact with us directly.¹⁷

Support teachers in deprived schools to develop online lessons

There are also gaps in the capacity of teachers to set up online learning between different schools. Recent polling by Teacher Tapp found that teachers in schools with the highest proportions of students eligible for free school meals are the least likely to say they could broadcast a lesson for their class to access (47% vs 34%), or that they could accept work remotely from their class (73% vs 53%). Gaps also exist between state schools and those in the private sector. While 69% of private school teachers feel prepared to do video lessons, this figure is only 40% in the state sector.¹⁸ Teachers are likely to need support and training in how to deliver content online, especially teachers in the most disadvantaged schools, who currently feel the least able to deliver teaching in this way. Steps to develop resources open to all children are also welcome, such as the work the BBC is undertaking to produce daily online lessons for students,¹⁹ and Eton giving free access to its own online learning platform to all year 11 and 13 students in state schools.²⁰

Mitigate impact on attainment gap when schools return

Even if all possible steps were taken to minimise the impact of school closures on the attainment gap, having students away from school for a long period is likely to have a substantial impact on attainment, especially for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Our sister charity the Education Endowment Foundation will be releasing work shortly on the likely scale of the impact.

Looking in the longer term, it will be important to put in place interventions to help students to catch up when schools restart. This could for example include increasing the pupil premium to help schools provide additional support for disadvantaged students when they return to school, or catch up sessions

¹⁵ One to One Tuition. Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/one-to-one-tuition/> and New EEF trial: low-cost tutoring can boost struggling pupils' maths results by +3 months. (2018) Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-evaluation-of-affordable-tutoring/>

¹⁶ Private Tuition 2019 (2019) Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/private-tuition-polling-2019/>

¹⁷ Contact Us. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/contact-us/>

¹⁸ Monitoring COVID-19 readiness in schools (2020) Teacher Tapp. Available at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/monitoring-covid-19-readiness-in-schools/>

¹⁹ How Bitesize will support you while you're learning from home (2020) BBC Bitesize. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zn9447h>

²⁰ C. Lough (2020) Coronavirus: Eton offers free courses to state pupils. TES. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-eton-offers-free-courses-state-pupils>

for this group of students before other students return. This issue should be examined in detail over the coming months and includes wider access to small group and one-to-one tuition (as above), plus a focus on evidence-based interventions.

Access to free school meals

All the issues looked at above are underpinned by the need for students to be able to access food when away from school. For some students, their free school meal is their only guaranteed meal of the day. If students are not physically well, learning cannot be their primary concern.

The government have announced a nationwide scheme to provide pupil with vouchers, which is now up and running, although concerns have been raised that not all schools have yet received access. Schools can either continue to provide food to families themselves or provide eligible children's families with a £15 shopping voucher redeemable in several different supermarkets. The Trust welcomed the introduction of this scheme, but concerns remain as to whether it can successful get food to all those who need it. This includes the worry that previously ineligible families whose financial circumstances have worsened due to the crisis may be missed. Additionally, because free school meals are universal at primary school, some parents may not yet have registered children as being eligible. The situation will need to be closely monitored in the coming weeks, and if the system is not working, it should be changed to ensure all families who need support receive it.

Apprenticeships

At the intersection of education and the labour market, apprenticeships are likely to be hugely impacted by the crisis, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds particularly affected. Issues range from the immediate financial pressures many are likely to face, to the longer term impacts likely to result from damage to the economy.

Financial impacts

The most immediate concern is the difficult financial situation many apprentices are likely to face in the coming months. While apprentices can be furloughed, for many their wages are already low, so they may struggle to cope on levels any lower than they already receive. The minimum wage for apprentices is lower than that of other employees, (£4.15 per hour for those under 19 and those over the age of 19 but in the first year of their apprenticeship, compared to £6.45 for 18 to 20 year olds, going up to £8.72 for those 25 and over),²¹ and the median wage for all Level 2 and 3 apprentices is just £6.95 per hour, which falls even further when looking at specific sectors.²²

The Trust welcomes the government's recent announcement that furloughed apprentices should be paid at least the Apprentice Minimum Wage (or other relevant minimum wage, depending on their eligibility), even if it is more than 80% of their standard wage. However, this may put additional financial pressure on some employers, who will be required to make up the difference from the 80% supplied by government.

Apprentices on the lowest wages are likely to struggle with any reduction in their pay. Indeed, a large proportion of apprentices have reported facing financial difficulties even before the current crisis.²³ We would encourage any employers able to do so (especially those in larger companies), to top up the money they receive when furloughing apprentices, to ensure those on low levels of pay, even if above the minimum required, do not suffer financially if at all possible.

Both of these issues are likely to impact apprentices from lower socio-economic backgrounds the most, who are more likely to be doing lower level apprenticeships, with correspondingly lower levels of pay.²⁴ Apprentices from poorer backgrounds may also be less likely to receive financial support from their families, especially if their families are under increased financial strain. With a combination of redundancies, furloughing and breaks in learning, many apprentices may be forced to leave their apprenticeships altogether. We would encourage the government and employers to do all they can to support this particularly vulnerable group of learners.

²¹ Become an Apprentice. Gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/apprenticeships-guide/pay-and-conditions>. (Note, these figures are the higher minimum wage rate introduced on the 1st of April 2020. It is not currently clear whether furloughed workers who were paid the minimum wage will receive 80% of this new level or of their previous pay. Before this increase, the £4.15 minimum wage rate for an apprentice was £3.90).

²² Apprenticeship Pay Survey 2018/19 – England (2020) Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/857210/aps-2018-19-england-report.pdf

²³ The real cost of an Apprenticeship: Are young women paying the price (2018) Young Women's Trust. Available at: https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/assets/0001/0282/2018_YWT_Report_The_Cost_v04.pdf

²⁴ Deprivation tables for further education and skills: 2015/16 to 2018/19 (2019) Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-further-education-and-skills>

Access to training and assessments

The Department for Education has encouraged training providers to move both training and assessments for apprentices online if possible. However, as with school pupils, there is a concern that not all apprentices will have access to the resources needed to access online learning, including a computer or tablet, an internet connection with adequate data, or a suitable workspace.

There are also serious concerns that training providers will face substantial financial pressures. Due to the pandemic, employers are now able to pause an apprentices' learning for up to 12 weeks, but providers will not be paid for apprentices during any breaks, which could lead many providers to close, some permanently.²⁵

Long term impacts

In the coming months many employers are going to face difficult decisions when trying to keep their businesses afloat. As apprenticeships have only started to rise again in popularity over the last few years, there is a danger that employers may not prioritise the long-term benefit of apprentices. These roles may seem an easy thing to cut, and employers may also become less willing to invest in them in the immediate future. Existing issues, such as the lack of supply of, and inequities in access to, higher and degree apprenticeships are also likely to be exacerbated by the crisis, given the negative impacts on both providers and young people. Making the case for both the economic returns and the social mobility benefits of apprenticeships will be vital in the coming months.

²⁵ Apprenticeships on the brink of collapse after Education Department refuses to implement Cabinet Office Covid-19 guidelines (2020) Association of Employment and Learning Providers. Available at: <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/apprenticeships-on-the-brink-of-collapse-after-education-department-refuses-to-implement-cabinet-office-covid-19-guidelines/>

Higher Education

A level exam cancellations

With A levels cancelled, the grades which decide student's university destinations will now be determined by an entirely new system. Instead of exams, teachers will make a guided assessment of their pupils' attainment, including their judgement of their likely grade, and how they would rank compared to other students in their class. This information will then be used by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), to assign grades, and adjusted to reflect the balance of prior attainment and previous exam results in the school or college. If students are not happy with their grade, they will be able to appeal and sit an exam as soon as it is feasible to do so, or wait until the summer 2021 exam series.

The Trust have welcomed the decision not to decide final grades on the basis of predicted grades alone, as our research has shown they are more often than not inaccurate, and often underpredict the performance of high-attaining disadvantaged students.²⁶ But other challenges remain. Any system relying on teacher assessment risks underestimating the abilities of disadvantaged students, as teacher assessment can unconsciously disadvantage students from certain groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, teachers have been found to be less likely to judge low-income students as having above average ability in reading or in maths, even when their previous test scores indicate as such.²⁷

Looking to the role of Ofqual, there are also challenges in how the regulator validates the grades set by teachers, with the inevitability of winners and losers in the system. However it is welcome that work undertaken after the school shutdown will not be considered, and steps have been taken to avoid punishing schools with low prior attainment but high levels of value added, by taking into account both their previous A level exam results as well as the prior attainment of their cohort of students.

There are also potential issues for any appeals process. The standard appeals process for exams can be difficult to navigate and there is a cost to any appeal. If these barriers are not removed at a time when appeals are likely, they may prevent disadvantaged students from making an appeal and widen inequalities within the system between students. It is also the case that students from poorer homes are less likely to be in a position to resit exams, either soon after the summer or the following year.

University admissions

As outlined, there are real concerns that the system to award grades in lieu of exams risks disadvantaging students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The Trust has frequently championed contextual admissions in offer making in the past,²⁸ and given these challenges, it is important these same principles are applied by universities in the coming months, when making their final decisions on acceptances. Students from widening participation backgrounds who have missed

²⁶ G. Wyness (2017) Rules of the Game: disadvantaged students and the university admissions process. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rules-of-the-Game.pdf>

²⁷ L. Platt, L. Dearden, E. Greaves & M. Rainsberry (2016) Stereotyped at seven? Biases in teachers' judgements of pupils' ability and attainment. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Stereotyped-at-seven-Biases-in-teachers-%E2%80%99-of-pupils-Platt-Dearden/5252b04c3b8df3c8a35b9c70357bd06473d03027>.

²⁸ V. Boliver, C. Crawford, M. Powell and W. Craige (2017) Admissions in context. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/admissions-in-context-access-gap/>, Blog: Moving the dial on contextual admissions. C. Cullinane & L. Bruce (2019) Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/moving-the-dial-on-contextual-admissions/>

out on their offer grades should be given additional consideration, to take into account the ways in which they may have been disadvantaged in the grade awarding process.

There is also a danger that, with exams cancelled, universities will make greater use of unconditional offers. Indeed, some institutions did start to extend these offers, which the Office for Students responded to quickly, by calling on providers to stop any changes to existing offers for a two-week period.²⁹ The issue of a surge in unconditional offers is particularly important from a widening participation perspective, as previous research has shown students from areas with historically low rates of participation in higher education are more likely to receive this type of offer.³⁰ Unconditional offers put pressure on young people to make decisions that may not be optimal for them.

There remain many unknowns in this area. The re-introduction of number caps has been mooted, with the intention of preventing a cutthroat battle for students between financially stressed universities. It is however vital that if a cap is put in place, that it does not negatively impact on widening participation, particularly including fair access to selective universities, where there is greatest risk that those from the poorest backgrounds will miss out.

Outreach programmes

There are considerable challenges ahead for organisations like the Sutton Trust who run face to face programmes supporting young people into university. There is a danger that an entire cohort of students could miss out on outreach activities, which could then subsequently have a substantial impact on university access in 2020/21 and the years ahead. For our own programmes, we are working alongside our partners to do all we can to ensure face to face provision is replaced by content delivered online or alternative provision later in the year. We will be giving more detail on this in the coming weeks.³¹

Access to resources for online learning and assessments

Unlike schools, because universities are autonomous institutions, they are able to make their own decisions on end of year exams and assessments. Many have already replaced their exams with online assessments,³² but concerns have been raised as to whether this process will be fair for students who don't have access to the technology (a computer and a good enough internet connection) needed, or a suitable space to work in. We do not currently have information on access to these resources for students, with data especially challenging given many will have moved out of their normal accommodation to be at home with their families, where their access to resources may differ from term time. But this is an issue the Trust intends to look at in the coming weeks and months. Students may also have caring responsibilities for family members during the crisis, making it difficult for them to study or take online assessments. Similarly, we do not currently know the scale of these issues, but it is likely they will all impact students from lower socio-economic backgrounds the hardest.

²⁹ Provider guide to Corona Virus: Unconditional offer-making (2020) Office for Students. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/provider-guide-to-coronavirus/unconditional-offer-making/> (period starting the 23rd of March)

³⁰ Unconditional offers – An update for 2019 (2018) UCAS. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uol> (Note: this difference is largely explained by the institutions students from these areas are applying to, which are more likely to give this type of offer).

³¹ Sutton Trust Programmes and COVID-19 (2020) Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/covid-19/>

³² A Young-Powell (2020) 'It's a nightmare': how coronavirus is wreaking havoc on students' exams. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/25/its-a-nightmare-how-coronavirus-is-wreaking-havoc-on-students-exams>

Student unions have called on universities to implement a “no detriment” policy, that any changes to assessment should not result in students getting lower grades than what they have received in their previous assessments.³³ Many institutions have committed to doing so, but very few have yet given detail on how such a process will work.³⁴ When doing so, it is vital universities do whatever they can to limit the impact for the most disadvantaged students, who may find studying remotely and taking part in online assessments challenging. Alternative accommodations should be a priority, for example including exams in person at a later date for any students unable to do online assessments, without requiring they re-take the entire year, or the provision of devices to those without access to the right equipment.

Student finance

Like many sectors of society, some students may struggle with the cost of living during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those from poorer backgrounds. While students from different socio-economic backgrounds all take on paid work, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to say they are working to cover their basic living costs, which aren’t covered by their student loan or contributions from their parents.³⁵

Many of these students, who are likely to have been working in some of the roles most vulnerable in the current crisis, such as those in the hospitality or retail sectors, may now face significant financial challenges without this income. Students may also have problems if their parents have lost income, and so are no longer able to make the contributions which they are expected to under the student finance system. While families can update their circumstances for the next academic year if their economic situation has suddenly changed,³⁶ there is currently no way to do this in the short term so that support is given to those who need it. There are also specific challenges facing postgraduate students, who may have lost teaching income they rely on, and who may not continue to receive their stipends if their studies have to be paused.³⁷

Full time students are not able to claim Universal Credit,³⁸ and no specific support has so far been put in place nationally to help them following any loss of income due to the pandemic. Many universities have made hardship funding available, but depending on the scale of this issue, the money available may not be sufficient to meet this need. More information is needed on how many students are facing financial hardship during this crisis, and systems need to be put in place to get money to the students who need it most. One potential way to get additional funds to them in the short term could be through the current student finance system.³⁹

³³ D. Kernohan (2020) Can universities safely implement “no detriment” assessment policies? WONKHE. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/can-universities-safely-implement-no-detriment-policies/>

³⁴ D. Kernohan (2020) Can universities safely implement “no detriment” assessment policies? WONKHE. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/can-universities-safely-implement-no-detriment-policies/>

³⁵ *Unpublished data from the Sutton Trust* – polling of recent graduates carried out at the end of 2019, graduates who worked during term time and exam periods while at university were asked why they had done so. Half of graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds worked to cover their basic living costs, while a lower proportion, 46%, of those from better-off backgrounds cited this reason.

³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-current-students#my-parentpartner-has-recently-lost-their-job-how-will-this-affect-my-student-finance>

³⁷ A. Ceccarelli & S. Swain (2020) Covid-19: Won’t somebody think of the postgraduate research students? Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/covid-19-wont-somebody-think-of-the-postgraduate-research-students/> (Note: UKRI have since clarified since this was published that their PhD students should continue to receive stipends currently).

³⁸ Note: There are a few exceptions to this, including if a student is responsible for a child, or if a student is receiving other disability benefits and has limited capacity for work. See: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/universal-credit-and-student>

³⁹ L. Hunter-Blackburn (2020) Student financial support in a time of social isolation. WONKHE. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/student-financial-support-in-a-time-of-social-isolation/>

Access to the workplace

The pandemic will have serious economic consequences for the country. When opportunities are sparse, it is likely to be those from poorer backgrounds who suffer, as opportunities are kept close to those with resources, contacts and know how. Recessions are also known to have considerable impacts on educational aspirations and opportunities, with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to have their educational decisions influenced by labour market conditions, while those from better-off backgrounds often stay in education even if the economic benefit is less certain.⁴⁰ In the coming months and years, interventions to promote and protect social mobility in the job market will be vital. The Trust would encourage all employers to keep this in mind, and use best practices in their recruitment practices, including contextual recruitment and paid fully advertised internships,⁴¹ wherever possible. The Trust will be releasing detailed guidance on social mobility in the workplace later this year.

In the short term, formal internships and work experience placements are likely to decline, as physical offices have closed. If possible, employers (particularly those with large and/or well-established work experience programmes) should look at moving these experiences online. It's also important for employers to ensure that advantaged young people are not gaining a competitive edge in this time through less formal opportunities gained through personal connections, which are not open to all young people.

⁴⁰ A. Tumino & M. Taylor (2015) The impact of local labour market conditions on school leaving decisions. Institute for Social & Economic Research. Available at: <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2015-14.pdf>

⁴¹ Elitist Britain 2019 (2019) Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/elitist-britain-2019/>

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