COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief
#2: University Access & Student Finance

THE SUTTON TRUST

Rebecca Montacute and Erica Holt-White

KEY FINDINGS

University applicants

- A fifth of university applicants (19%) have changed their mind about their university attendance this autumn or have yet to decide. Of those who have changed plans in light of the COVID-19 crisis, some are now planning to take gap years, while others have changed their preferred university. Working class students were more likely to have changed their mind.

- Almost half (48%) of applicants feel the COVID-19 health crisis will have a negative impact on their chances of getting into their first-choice university. 31% felt it would have no impact. Working class applicants were more likely to be worried about the negative impact (51%, compared to 43% from middle class homes).

- Many students do not feel they are receiving enough support from their school for their university applications (35% are not satisfied overall).

- 43% of university applicants studying for A levels feel that the new assessment procedure will have a negative impact on their grades. While most feel that the impact will be small, 72% felt that the new grading system is less fair than in a normal year.

- Over half (52%) say they would be likely to take a replacement exam in the autumn if they don't get the grades they hope for. 60% of those attending private schools would be likely to resit, compared to 52% at state schools.

- Applicants from working class backgrounds were twice as likely to have insufficient access to internet access, devices for learning or a suitable place to study, compared to those from middle class homes.

- Private schools are almost twice as likely to be still teaching A level content as state schools (57% vs 30% receiving regular work and feedback from teachers).

University students

- 74% of students report that exams and assessments are now being carried out online, with 27% reporting that some marks are being based on previous assessment.

- 6% of students report that they do not have sufficient access to computers or devices required for learning and assessment. 5% report that they do not have sufficient internet access, and 23% report lack of access to suitable study space.

- 30% of students report that they are less able to afford study because of the pandemic, with those outside Russell Group institutions more likely to have such financial concerns.

- 34% of students report that they have lost a job, had reduced hours, or not been paid for work completed. While 22% report that their parents have been less able to support them financially. Students at Post-1992 universities were more likely to have suffered work-related losses.

- 30% of students are unsatisfied with the financial support offered by their university during the crisis, with 36% satisfied. However, many students are unsure, indicating a lack of awareness of what support their university is offering.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges for higher education across the UK. This year's cohort of university applicants now face months of uncertainty, as they try to make decisions on their future amid exam cancellations and a new system to determine grades, all without face-to-face support from their school. For students currently attending university, there are challenges too: delivery has shifted online, but not all students will be equally able to access that content, and many are also facing financial insecurity due to the economic impacts of the pandemic.

The new grading systems for A levels and equivalents, which will determine the results of this year's applicants, will be based primarily on teacher assessments, moderated by exam regulators in each UK nation.[1] However, research has shown that teacher assessments can underestimate the abilities of disadvantaged students,[2] and that predicted grades determined by teacher assessments underpredict disadvantaged high-achieving students in particular.[3] There are concerns that without action by the exam regulators, the systems in place to replace exams could similarly detriment students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with knock on impacts for their progression to

university.

Given the uncertainty caused by these changes, university applicants are likely to need more support than ever to navigate the process. This will be even more important for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who are less likely to be able to draw on the advice of family members with higher education experience themselves. But with schools closed for most pupils, it may be difficult for applicants to get the help they need. Similarly, there's also a danger that this year's applicants will miss out on A level content during the lockdown, with our recent impact briefing on school closures finding poorer students have less access to online learning than those who are better off.[4] For disadvantaged students about to go on to higher education, this could leave them with gaps in their knowledge base, putting them behind their peers before they have even begun at university. Applicants and their families may also be facing financial insecurity due to the pandemic, with potential impacts on both where they choose to study (for example, students worried about costs may choose to study closer to home), and perhaps even on their decision to go to university at all.

For current university students, since March, physical delivery of provision on campuses has ended, with taught content moving online, and universities needing to make decisions about how assessments will be carried out. But not all students will be impacted equally by these decisions, with the concern that disadvantaged students will find it more difficult to complete work away from campus, whether due to a lack of physical resources (such as a computer or laptop), not having access to an adequate internet connection, or not having a suitable space in which to study. Many undergraduates also risk losing the part-time work they rely on to support themselves financially while they study, with students often working in some of the sectors most heavily hit by the current crisis, including hospitality and retail. Supporting these students, especially those from the poorest backgrounds who are most reliant on such jobs, will be essential to protect student welfare in

Figure 1. Impact applicants think new A level grading system will have on their grades
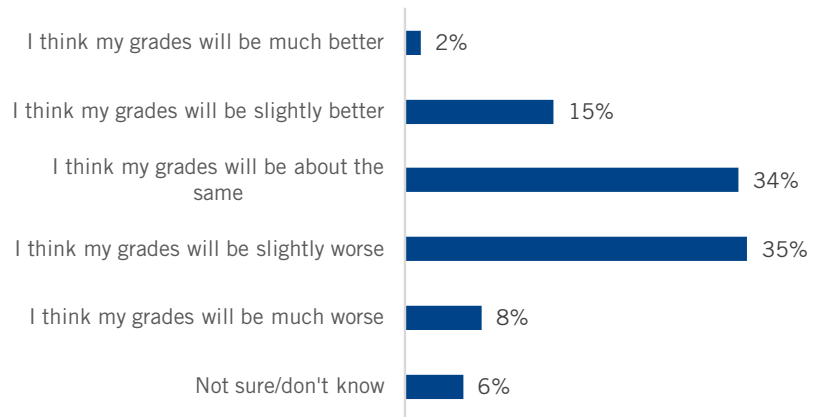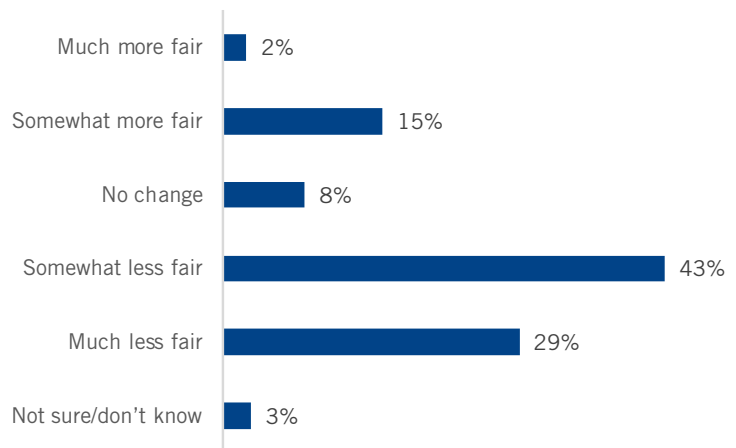

Figure 2. Views of applicants on the fairness of the new system to award grades

the coming months.

This report is the second of a series of impact briefs released by the Sutton Trust in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the ramifications of the current crisis on university applicants and current undergraduate students, with a focus on young people from less advantaged backgrounds. The brief will look at how schools, universities and government can lessen the impact of the crisis on these students, to help ensure all young people, no matter their background, continue to have the opportunity to both access and succeed at university.

UNIVERSITY APPLICANTS
Awarding Grades

Young people who were due to take exams this summer are at a crucial juncture in their educational journey, with the current health crisis

adding substantially to an already challenging period in their life. In order to explore their experiences, students who have applied to university for undergraduate study this year were surveyed by YouthSight at the beginning of April.[5]

Applicants studying for A levels (or equivalent exams) were asked how they thought the new grading system would impact on their own grades. Just under half (43%) said the new procedure would have a negative impact, with just 17% thinking their grades would improve (Figure 1).

While similar proportions of applicants from middle class backgrounds (ABC1) and working class backgrounds (C2DE) thought their grades would be worse, working class students were more worried about the new system having a large negative consequence on their grades (9% vs 5% of middle class students).

Attitudes were similar in terms of the new system's perceived fairness (Figure 2). 72% felt that the new grading system will be less fair than normal, though most felt the impact would be modest. Fewer than 1 in 5 (18%) thought that the new system would be fairer.

Applicants from better-off backgrounds were actually more likely to think the new system would be less fair than those from working class backgrounds (73% vs 64%).

Over half (52%) of applicants said they would be likely to take a replacement exam in the autumn if they didn't get the grades they hoped for. A higher proportion of applicants from private schools (60%) said they would be likely or very likely to retake their exams, compared to 52% from state schools (Figure 3).

Readiness for university

Even with A levels exams cancelled, students will still benefit from learning the content they would have covered during this time. For students going onto university, missing out on A level content now means they might be less prepared when they start at university in the autumn. This would pose an even greater challenge for those who don't get the grades they hope for, and who may instead need to sit the proposed replacement exams in the autumn.

The learning environment at home during this period will be important, both to study, and for the end stages of their university application, including research on institutions before making final choices. While most students reported sufficient access to the resources they need, a sizeable minority, almost 1 in 5 (17%) had either insufficient or not at all sufficient access to a suitable study space, 9% did not have sole access to a laptop, computer or tablet, and 7% did not have a good enough level of internet access (Figure 4). However, it is important to consider that it is difficult to measure the true scale of this issue, with young people without the resources needed to go online difficult to access for research.

Figure 3. Likelihood of applicants re-taking exams if they do not receive the grades they hoped for, by school type
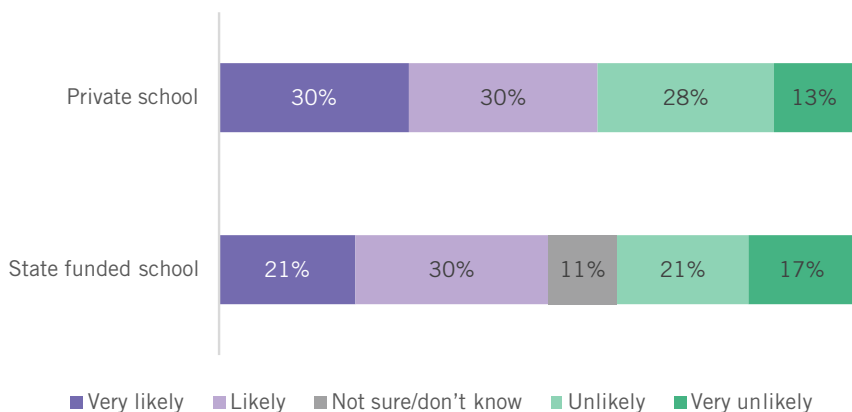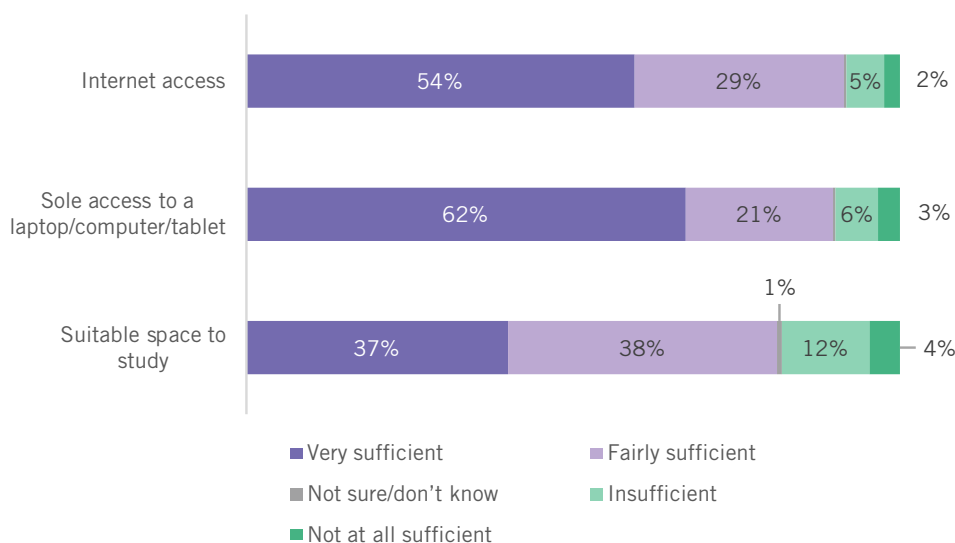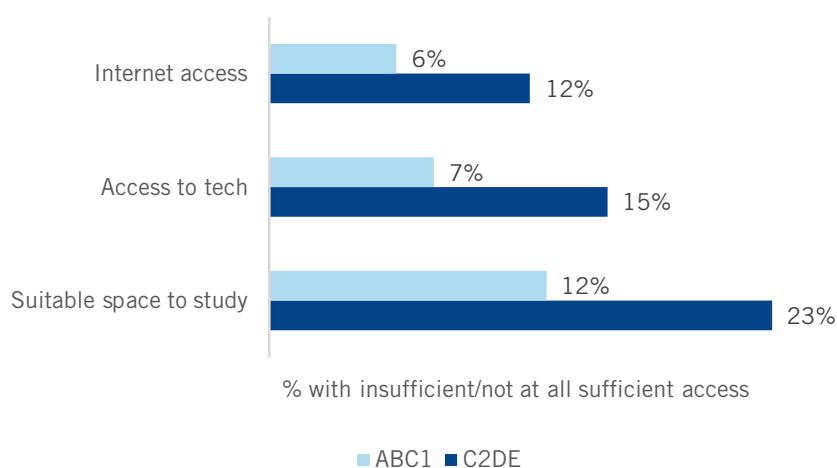

	Very likely	Likely	Not sure/don't know	Unlikely	Very unlikely
Private school	30%	30%		28%	13%
State funded school	21%	30%	11%	21%	17%

Figure 4. Access to resources needed for schoolwork and university applications

	Very sufficient	Fairly sufficient	Not sure/don't know	Insufficient	Not at all sufficient
Internet access	54%	29%		5%	2%
Sole access to a laptop/computer/tablet	62%	21%		6%	3%
Suitable space to study	37%	38%	1%	12%	4%

Note: For internet access 8% selected not applicable as they didn't feel it was needed, access to technology 7% and internet access 10%

Figure 5. Insufficient access to resources needed for schoolwork and university applications, by socio-economic background

	ABC1	C2DE
Internet access	6%	12%
Access to tech	7%	15%
Suitable space to study	12%	23%

% with insufficient/not at all sufficient access

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were twice as likely to not have adequate access to the resources needed (Figure 5). Almost a quarter (23%) of working class students reported not having an adequate space to study in, compared

to almost half the proportion (12%) of better-off students, with similar findings for both access to tech (15% vs 7%) and internet access (12% vs 6%).

Young people also report that many schools are not currently teaching A level content following exam cancellations, with a quarter of applicants overall reporting they are not receiving any work. Students at private schools were much more likely to be being set some work (81% vs 70% in state schools), with 57% of students in private schools being set regular work and receiving feedback from their teachers, compared to just 30% saying the same in state schools (Figure 6).

Tough choices

Changes to the A level grading system, uncertainty around this year's admissions cycle (for example, there have been reports that student number caps may be re-introduced)[6] and financial issues are all making this a worrying time for university applicants. Concerns about A level grades may lead some students to defer entry in order to have the opportunity to re-sit, and financial worries may lead students to re-consider which institutions they want to attend, how far from home they can travel or whether university is affordable at all for them this autumn. Given current uncertainty, it seems likely many final year students will be thinking hard about their university plans.

And indeed, a considerable proportion of university applicants, just under a fifth (19%), have either changed their mind about their university attendance this autumn in light of the coronavirus crisis, or are now uncertain. As of the beginning of April, a relatively early juncture of the crisis, a small number had already decided not to attend at all this autumn (4%), while others had changed their first-choice university (3%). A further 14% were unsure or have not yet decided if they will change their plans to attend this autumn.

Students from working class backgrounds were slightly more likely to have changed their plans due to

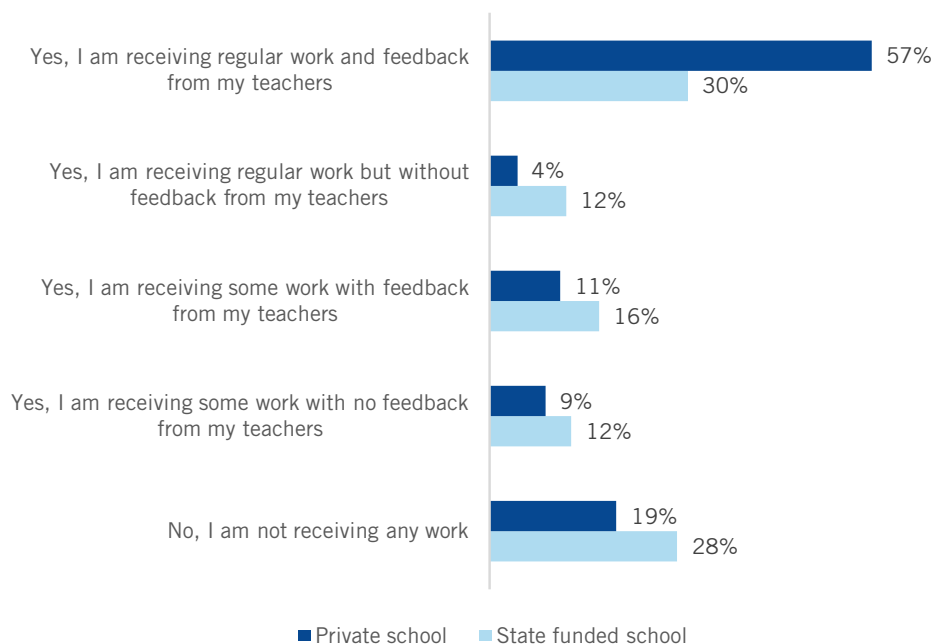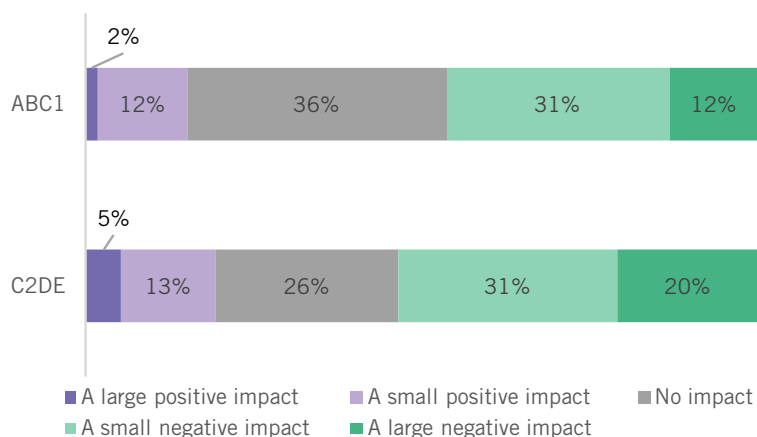Figure 6. Whether schools are currently setting A level content, by school type

	Private school	State funded school
Yes, I am receiving regular work and feedback from my teachers	57%	30%
Yes, I am receiving regular work but without feedback from my teachers	4%	12%
Yes, I am receiving some work with feedback from my teachers	11%	16%
Yes, I am receiving some work with no feedback from my teachers	9%	12%
No, I am not receiving any work	19%	28%

Figure 7. How applicants think the crisis will impact on their chance of going to their first-choice university

	A large positive impact	A small positive impact	No impact	A small negative impact	A large negative impact
ABC1	2%	12%	36%	31%	12%
C2DE	5%	13%	26%	31%	20%

Note: 8% of ABC1 and 5% of C2DE did not know or were not sure of the impact

the crisis, with 6% saying they would no longer attend university this year (compared to 4% of better off students). They were also more likely (4% vs 2%) to have changed their preferred university choice. The reasons for this disparity are not currently clear but, given Sutton Trust research has shown working class students are much more likely to stay living at home for university,[7] financial uncertainty due to the current crisis may play a significant role.

Concerningly, almost half (48%) of applicants think the COVID-19 health crisis will have a negative impact on their chances of getting into their

first-choice university, with a third (31%) saying they think it will have no impact. Students from working class backgrounds were more likely to think it will have a negative impact (51%) than those from middle class backgrounds (43%, see Figure 7).

Applicants were asked about the support they are receiving from their school with university applications, as well as the help and resources their school had provided with learning. While satisfaction with the support for learning was high (68%), they were less likely to be satisfied with the help they have received with the university application process (57%). This suggests there may be a gap in

support for applicants at this time, as schools try to cope with unprecedented challenges and focus on other issues.
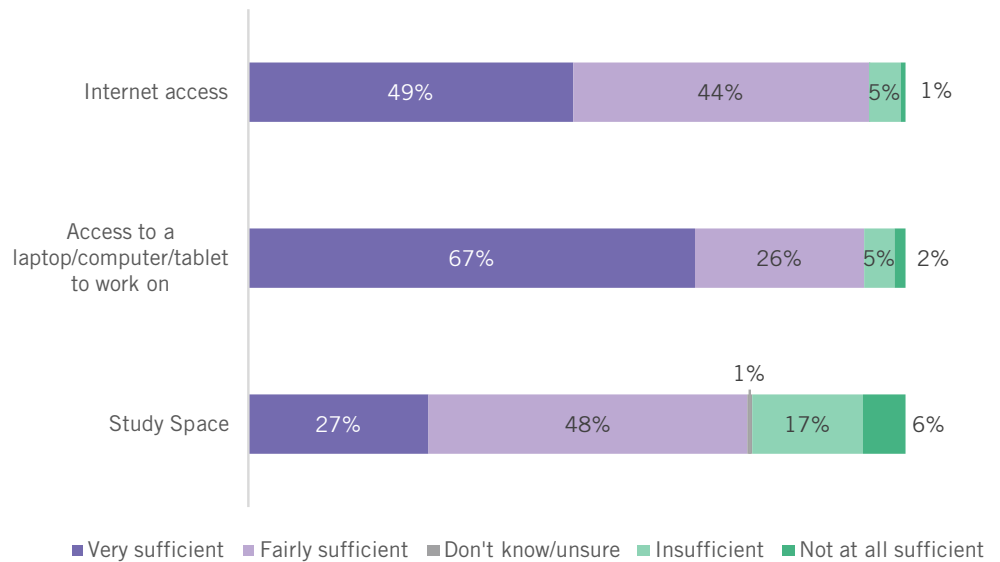
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Ability to work from home

The closure of universities has meant that students are now, like school pupils, learning from home. Many will have made the decision to leave their university accommodation and move back to their home with family or loved ones. As a consequence, the conditions students are now working in are likely to differ considerably, with less well-off students more likely to be living in cramped housing conditions, perhaps without adequate access to the technology needed to complete their work, or trying to work alongside dealing with difficult financial situations at home.

These issues were among several explored in a survey of university students conducted by YouthSight for the Trust between the 9th and the 14th of April.[8] As shown in Figure 8, most students reported currently having a sufficient level of internet access. Similarly, over 90% of students said their access to an electronic device to work on was sufficient. Lack of suitable space to study was however more common; with 23% reported not having a suitable space to carry out their university work. While the vast majority of students did have access to suitable technology and an adequate internet connection, small but significant numbers of young people do not: 5% of students reported they did not have sufficient access to the internet and 6% said they did not have sole access to a laptop, computer or tablet to work on. This was also reflected in a small survey carried out with alumni of Sutton Trust programmes currently at university on the impacts of the current crisis.
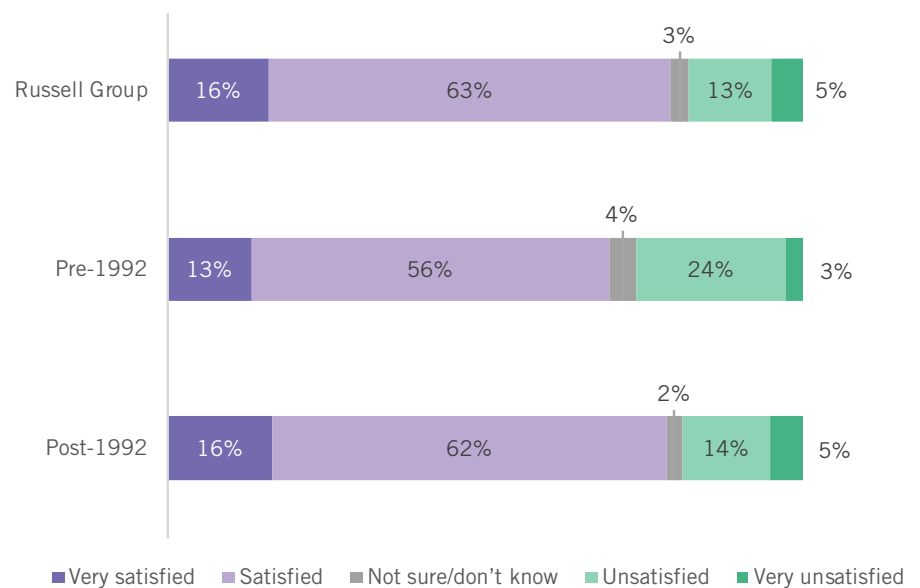
Students from working class backgrounds (C2DE) were slightly less likely to have access to a suitable

Figure 8. Access to resources needed to complete university work and assessments

Note: For each of the above, 1% selected not applicable

Figure 9. Satisfaction with University's actions to provide access to learning by institution type

study space, with 26% reporting they did not have sufficient access, compared to 22% of students from middle class families (ABC1). Similarly, while only 15% of students who attended a private school (a proxy for socio-economic background, with the majority of independently educated students coming from wealthy families) did not have adequate access to study space, 25% of state-educated students lacked access. Students from lower socio-economic groups were also slightly more likely to lack access to internet and technology.

Students were also asked for their

perceptions of actions taken by their university to provide access to learning. Overall, 77% of students were satisfied with their actions. As shown in Figure 9, those studying at Pre-1992 institutions were the least likely to say they were happy with their university's provision (69% vs 79% in both Russell Group and Post-1992 institutions). Students from state schools were 11 percentage points more likely to be unsatisfied than ex-private school pupils; which may reflect the latter's greater likelihood of attending Russell Group institutions, where students as a whole were likely to be satisfied with provision.

Assessments

As universities are closed, students are no longer able to physically take exams and other assessments on campus. Unlike schools (where there has been a nationwide decision on how to determine pupils' grades in the absence of exams), as autonomous institutions, universities have each had to make their own decision on how best to determine students' final marks this year.

The most common method of awarding marks reported were for assessments to move online (Figure 10). 74% of students said that exams and assessments are now being carried out in this way, with 27% saying that marks are being based on students' previous assessment. Overall, there are a mixture of approaches being taken across universities and even within universities, with respondents often reporting that multiple forms of assessment are taking place, differing by module or course. Concerningly, 8% of students said they were not aware of how they would be assessed, despite the closeness of the end of the academic year. Students from working class backgrounds were 5 percentage points more likely to be in such a position.

Overall, as shown in Figure 11, across different institution types, the majority of students are happy with the actions their institutions have taken to replace assessments given the challenging circumstances. However, a considerable minority, over a quarter (28%), are either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their university's actions.

Financial implications

It is common for students to have a part-time job alongside their studies, in order to support themselves with costs like rent and reading materials. However, Sutton Trust research has found that while students from all socio-economic backgrounds are similarly likely to take on paid work, those from poorer backgrounds are more likely to work to cover their basic living costs, which aren't covered by their loan or by contributions from their parents.[9] These students will be the most

Figure 10. Approaches to awarding marks for missed university assignments (multiple options allowed), by institution type
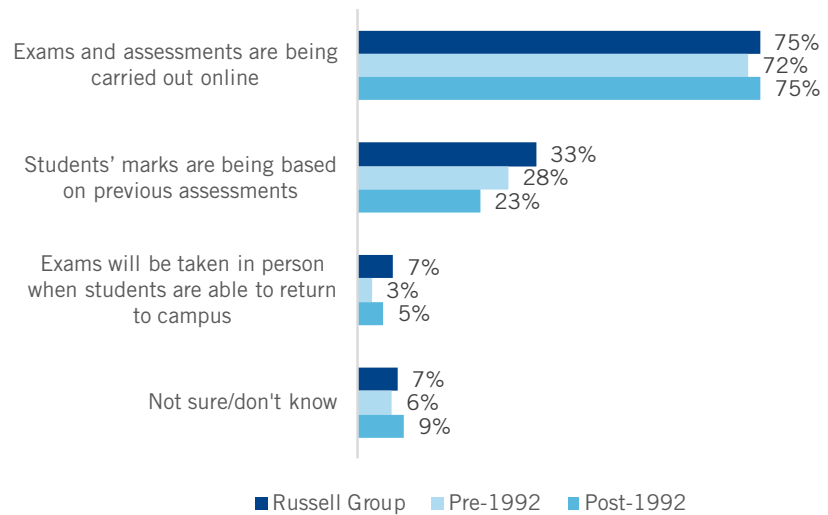

Figure 11. Satisfaction with university's actions to replace assessments, by institution type
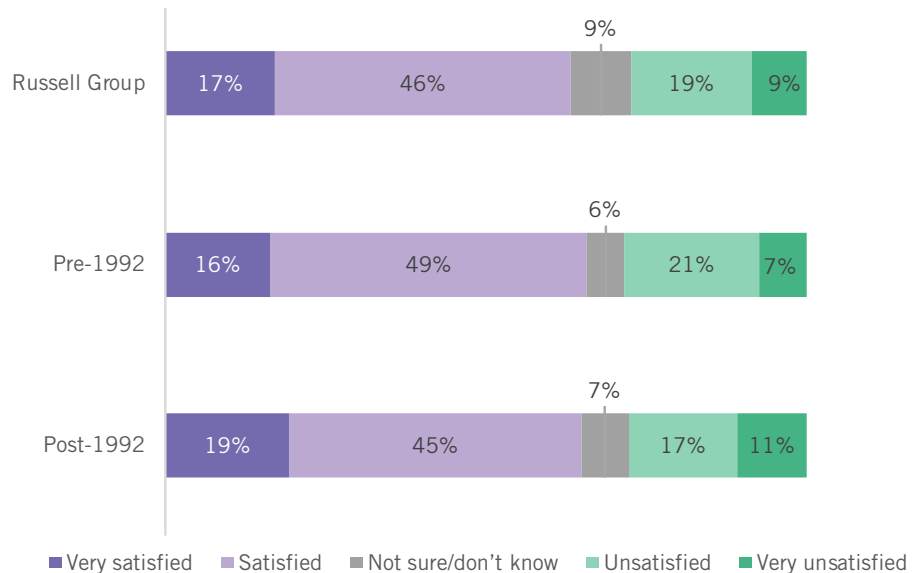

Figure 12. Experience of financial issues due to coronavirus

vulnerable to job losses, those which millions of people, including many students, have suffered due to the pandemic.

And indeed, many students did report

financial difficulties due to the crisis. Just over a third of students (34%) reported that they have lost a job, had reduced hours, or not been paid for work completed due to the current crisis (Figure 12). 22% said that their parents have been less able to support them financially, and 26% reported that while they had not experienced financial issues so far, they were expecting to in the next few months. This echoes findings from a survey of Sutton Trust programmes alumni currently at university, many of whom also reported experiencing financial hardship due to the coronavirus crisis.

Undergraduates who attended private school (a proxy for socio-economic background) were less likely to have lost a job or to have had their hours reduced (22% vs 35% of students from state schools). Such experiences of financial hardship were also less common for students at Russell Group universities, with students at Post-1992 institutions most likely to report these issues (Figure 13).

When asked how the current crisis is impacting their finances, 30% of respondents said they are less able to afford their studies, including 8% who are much less able to do so. Students in non-Russell Group universities were more likely to have financial concerns, with those at Post-1992 institutions 4 percentage points more likely than those attending Russell Groups to report some level of financial impact (Figure 14). While financial concerns caused by the crisis were relatively common across socio-economic groups, with 31% of students in ABC1 and 29% in C2DE reporting the current crisis made them either slightly or much less able to afford to study, being much less able to afford to study was slightly more common for working class students (10% vs 7%).

Students were also asked whether they were satisfied with actions their university had taken to support students experiencing financial

Figure 13. Experience of financial issues due to the crisis by institution type
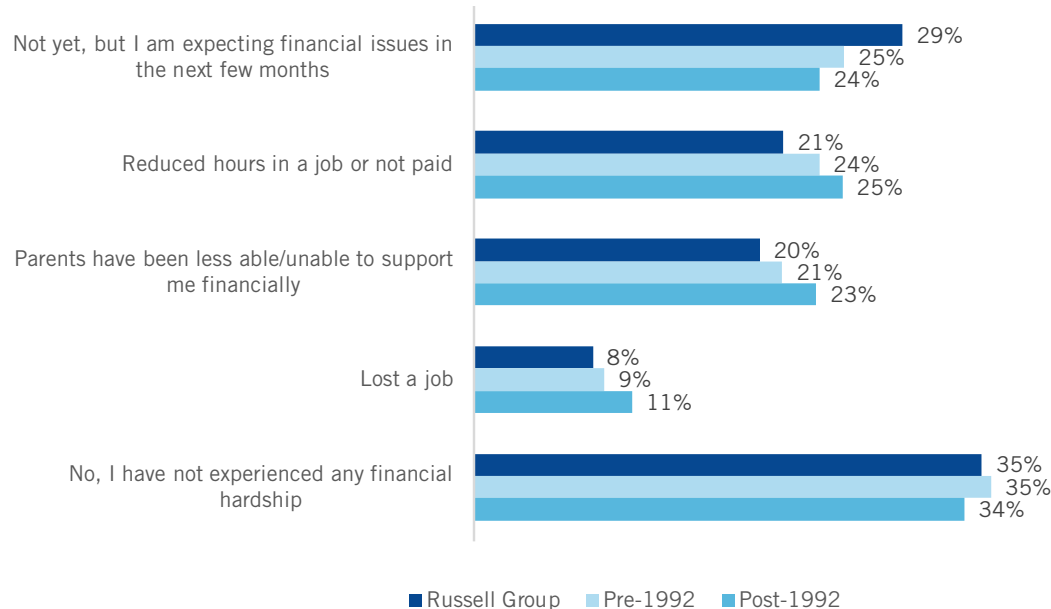

Figure 14. Impact of coronavirus crisis on affordability to study, by institution
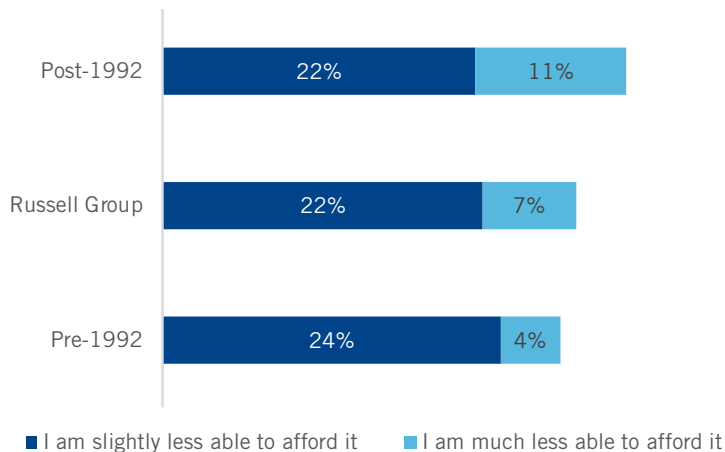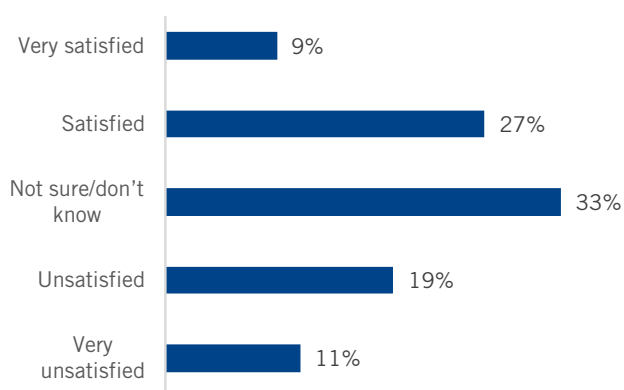

Figure 15. Satisfaction with university's actions to support students experiencing financial hardship

hardship (Figure 15). Many universities are providing additional financial support to their students; for instance, the University of Glasgow have set up emergency crisis grants of up to £500 per student, and financial hardship grants of between £500 and £1,500 per student,[10] and King's

College are providing internet dongles for those who do not have home internet connections.[11] While 36% of students are satisfied or very satisfied with their institution's support for students, 31% are either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied. Many students do not seem to be aware of the actions

their university is taking, with 33% selecting don't know or unsure. This is of concern if they are a student who would benefit from financial assistance at this time. Students from working class backgrounds are more likely to say they are satisfied by the financial help provided by universities for students experiencing hardship – perhaps because these schemes are more likely to be aimed at poorer students. However, almost a third (31%) of working class students are not satisfied with the provision available.

DISCUSSION

Access

This brief has set out the challenges facing the current and next generation of university students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on young people from low income backgrounds. Many of these challenges will require actions from schools, universities and government in the months ahead, to ensure new barriers are not put in place to young people's access and participation in higher education. Chief among these barriers are assessment, support (including information, advice and guidance) and finance.

There is a risk that the new system to determine A level grades, with its reliance on teacher assessments known to often disadvantage poorer students, could have a negative impact on such students meeting their offer grades. The Trust has frequently championed the importance of contextual admissions in the past.[12] Given the current circumstances, it is vital that universities apply the same principles they usually apply to offers when making final decisions on places, taking into account the greater uncertainties of such a grading system, along with the possibilities of systematic bias. If students from widening participation backgrounds have missed their offer grades, their context should be given additional consideration when final decisions on places are made.

There have been reports, although so far unconfirmed, of the re-introduction of a student numbers cap this year.[13] Such a cap would aim to manage an anticipated decline in international student numbers, so that the most popular universities could not simply replace lost international students with home applicants, resulting in far fewer students attending less prestigious and more financially precarious institutions. While analysis has suggested any cap is unlikely to have a large impact, as many institutions will probably undershoot their allowance,[14] it is vital that any cap put in place is designed in a way which does not disadvantage poorer students. For example, widening participation students could be excluded from the cap altogether, or any cap could be linked to an institution's access and participation plan (APP), allowing universities to recruit students from this group outside of the cap in line with the targets in their APP. The Trust welcome moves from the Office for Students (OfS) to keep APP plans in place,[15] and would encourage all universities to still do all they can to still meet targets set out in their APP. However, an increased use of unconditional offers, as universities attempt to secure students in uncertain times, pose another concern in this year's admissions cycle. Unconditional offers put pressure on young people to make decisions that may not be optimal for them. The Trust welcomes the quick action on this issue by the OfS, who issued a moratorium on unconditional offer making until the 4th May.[16] This is a particular concern for disadvantaged applicants, as previous research has shown that applicants from areas with historically low rates of participation in higher education are more likely to receive unconditional offers (although this is largely explained by the institutions they are applying to being more likely to give this type of offer).[17]

Given all the uncertainties surrounding the university application process this year, it is also important applicants are given the help and support they need to navigate the admissions process. Our results here show that many applicants are not satisfied with the support they are getting from their schools, and a recent survey from HEPI found that just under a third (28%) of applicants have not had clear information around coronavirus from the universities they have applied to.[18] Applicants in their final stages of decision-making are also missing out on offer-holder days and other supports that they would normally receive from universities at this time. Both schools and universities should provide applicants with clear help and support as they make decisions in the difficult times ahead, replacing face-to-face support with remote provision where possible. For its part, the Trust, working with its university partners, will be providing a comprehensive online platform to all the young people that would have been supported through face-to-face provision.

There is also an opportunity to use the interruption to normal business in university admissions to think seriously about how the system could be improved in future. This year's A level grading process has further highlighted the weaknesses of predicted grades, with existing research showing that just 16% prove accurate.[19] Removing predicted grades from the system altogether has the potential to make the system fairer for lower income students, especially those who are high attaining, who tend to have their grades underpredicted.[20] The OfS have set out two potential options for reform in their (currently paused) consultation on university admissions.[21] The first involves a smaller change, where applications continue in the same way as they do now, but offers are only made after A level results are known, reducing or removing the role of predicted grades. The second option, Post Qualification Applications (PQA), would move both applications and offers to after students receive their final grades. This would completely remove predicted grades from the system, allowing both students and universities to make decisions based on achieved grades, and decisions which are fully informed.

University assessment and student finance

Looking to the impact of the crisis on current undergraduates, there are many challenges for these students in the weeks and months ahead. While most universities are moving to online delivery and assessment, students'

ability to take part online will differ. A small proportion do not have access to the internet or technology needed, and where universities are expecting students to take part online, they should provide students who need it with the required resources to do so. A more difficult and more common issue for students is not having access to a suitable study space while away from campus, with students from working class backgrounds more likely to face this issue. Universities should do as much as they can to accommodate such students when in-person provision returns, including allowing re-taken exams without additional tuition fees. They should also look at additional interventions for those who may have missed out on essential preparatory A level content, for example catch-up classes to support next year's first year students in courses where this is critical.

Many universities have also put in place "no detriment" policies, whereby results from assessments carried out during lockdown will not reduce a student's overall grade from those they had achieved previously. However, there are concerns about how these policies will be put in place in practice, and that there could be wide variation in approach by different institutions. We would encourage the OfS to monitor any impact on the attainment of students from under-represented groups, and to encourage universities to ensure the impact of any policies on these students and the university attainment gap is considered and carefully monitored.

Concerningly, findings in this brief show that many students are struggling financially due to the crisis. While students from all backgrounds are equally likely to work, and to have lost a job or had their hours reduced due to the pandemic, those from the poorest backgrounds are the most likely to be working to meet their essential living costs to start with, as well as being less likely to have parental support to make up the gap. There is a danger that without financial support, some students could be unable to continue with their studies, and they currently fall through the gaps for other forms of financial support. Most students are not eligible for Universal Credit,[22]

so there is a danger many will be left without any support if they are not or cannot be furloughed in their current jobs, or if they had planned to work over summer but that work is no longer available. Other students may have previously relied on financial support from their parents, which they may no longer be able to give if their financial situation has changed due to the crisis. Any change in circumstances will not be reflected in the support provided by student finance until the next academic year, potentially leaving students without the help they need in the short term.[23] Support should be put in place urgently to help students who are struggling financially, for example through specific support grants from government or universities (as has already been done in Scotland),[24] or by allowing students to temporarily claim Universal Credit. Universities should also do more to ensure all students are aware of any financial support they are offering during the crisis.

Looking ahead

Financial issues are not restricted to current university students. The financial consequences of the coronavirus crisis could have a significant impact on the affordability of university to the next generation of students. A decline in the ability of parents to support, coupled with the likely lasting damage to the part-time jobs market, in combination with the already high levels of debt associated with university, has significant potential to damage access to higher education. It could also change behaviour by encouraging more students to attend universities close to home in order to save on the costs of living in student accommodation. This can mean missing out on a university that is potentially a better fit for the young person. Given the existing geographical patterns of university attendance, this is likely to have the most negative impact on those from less well-off backgrounds.[25]

Effects of the pandemic will also be felt into the future. Young people in their penultimate year of schooling are also likely to suffer. Data from applicants to Sutton Trust programmes shows that more

disadvantaged young people are receiving less learning from their school during the period of closures. Furthermore, this summer would be a time when organisations like the Sutton Trust, along with universities themselves, run outreach programmes for young people from under-represented groups, giving them support, advice and a vital taste of university life. Virus restrictions have decimated this provision.

While the Trust itself, along with others, is undertaking a significant programme of online delivery to alleviate the impact, there are of course some aspects of physically visiting a university campus and interacting face-to-face with staff and fellow students that cannot be easily replaced. However, now more than ever, outreach activity is essential to supporting young people through this crisis and ensuring there is fair access to future opportunities. It is vital that universities continue to commit to widening participation, despite the financial challenges, and that all efforts are made to ensure alternative provision for next year's university applicants is delivered. As a consequence of the ongoing health crisis, these students may need even more support, input and guidance to fulfil their potential, and it is important that years of progress in this area are not lost.

The pandemic had caused huge challenges across society. Actions already taken by those involved in admissions and undergraduate teaching are encouraging. However, more needs to be done in the weeks and months ahead to ensure everyone has equal access to the opportunities university provides. Action is likely to be most needed to protect young people from the poorest backgrounds. If action is taken now, and the worst impacts of the pandemic on these young people is mitigated, they stand to benefit not just in the rest of their time in education, but for the rest of their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ASSESSMENT AND ADMISSIONS

1. **Exam regulators, including Ofqual, should monitor attainment gaps in the new grading system and consider statistical adjustments if necessary.** If substantial socio-economic attainment gaps open up during the adjustment process, Ofqual should be prepared to make further adjustments.

2. **Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who have narrowly missed their offer grades should be given additional consideration.** Contextualising admissions in this year's application cycle is more important than ever, given the recent upheaval in schools and the cancellation of exams.

3. **In the future, university admissions should move to Post-Qualification Applications.** The unreliability of predicted grades has been acknowledged in Ofqual's role in adjusting grades. We should take this opportunity to remove predicted grades from the system entirely by moving to a post-qualification system going forward.

4. **If student number caps are to be introduced, they should be carefully calibrated to minimise their impact on disadvantaged students and the widening participation agenda.** Any temporary re-introduction of number caps should not undermine the efforts of selective universities in particular to meet their Access and Participation Plan targets.

5. Approaching the final UCAS deadline, and around A Level results day, **it is vital that schools are able to offer additional support and advice to students making decisions around their future**. This is particularly the case for those who are the first in their family to attend university, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds more generally. This could be done remotely if necessary.

STUDENTS

1. **Additional financial support for students is vital both to ensure current students can continue their courses, and access is not harmed for current university applicants from families suffering from financial stresses due to coronavirus**. Universities should bolster hardship funds where possible, including increasing awareness of such funds. But government should also consider stepping in to offer emergency maintenance grants.

2. **Universities should ensure that students, particularly those in their final year, are not disadvantaged due to changes in assessment required by the lockdown.** This is particularly the case for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to have access to the equipment, internet access and workspaces required to complete assessments online. Universities should offer all reasonable accommodations to such students.

REFERENCES

1. Ofqual in England, the Scottish Qualifications Authority in Scotland, Qualifications Wales in Wales and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland.

2. T. Campbell (2016) Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils' Ability and Attainment. Journal of Social Policy. Available at: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Stereotyped-at-Seven-Biases-in-Teacher-Judgement-of-Campbell/5252b04c3b8df3c8a35b9c70357bd06473d03027

3. 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

4. C. Cullinane & R. Montacute (2020) Impact brief: school shutdown. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/

5. YouthSight surveyed applicants who applied to university this year through UCAS, with polling carried out online through their applicant omnibus between the 3rd and the 8th of April 2020. The applicant omnibus is weighted to be representative by gender, age and school type. Data here includes 511 university applicants aged 17 to 19, of whom 452 were taking A levels or equivalents.

6. Government set to cap university admissions amid Covid-19 chaos. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/government-set-to-cap-university-admissions-amid-covid-19-chaos

7. M. Donnelly and S. Gamsu (2018) Home and Away. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/home-and-away-student-mobility/

8. YouthSight surveyed current undergraduate students, with polling taking place online through their student omnibus between the 9th and the 14th of April 2020. The student omnibus is weighted to be representative by Gender, Course Year and University Group (Russell Group, Post-1992 and Pre-1992 institutions). Data here includes 895 home (UK) undergraduate students.

9. 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 compared to 46% of those from

better-off backgrounds.

10. Coronavirus: information for students and staff, University of Glasgow. Available at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/news/coronavirus/updatearchive/headline_717502_en.html

11. Your questions answered – assessment; Technology issues and study environments. King's College London. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/assessment#technology

12. 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/

13. Government set to cap university admissions amid Covid-19 chaos. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/government-set-to-cap-university-admissions-amid-covid-19-chaos

14. The recruitment economics of Covid-19. WONKHE. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-recruitment-economics-of-covid-19/

15. S. Lapworth (2020) Regulatory requirements during the coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic. Office for Students. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3147f6f5-e399-4bb0-b623-bb84f31534eb/covid-19-accountable-officer-letter-25-march.pdf

16. Further extension to moratorium on unconditional offer-making. Office for Students. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/further-extension-to-moratorium-on-unconditional-offer-making/

17. Unconditional offers – An update for 2019. UCAS. Available at: https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uoI

18. New poll finds almost one-third of applicants feel less confident they will get into their chosen university since the Coronavirus pandemic. Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/

19. G. Wyness (2016) Predicted grades: Accuracy and impact. UCL Institute of Education. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf

20. G. Wyness (2017) Rules of the game. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/rules-of-the-game-university-admissions/

21. Consultation on the higher education admissions system in England. Office for Students. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/64635347-b3fa-4ad7-86d3-cac01b664f12/consultation-on-the-higher-education-admissions-system-in-england-updated-18032020.pdf

22. 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. For more information see: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/universal-credit-and-student39

23. Guidance for current students: My parent/partner has recently lost their job. How will this affect my student finance? Gov.uk. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-current-students#my-parentpartner-has-recently-lost-their-job-how-will-this-affect-my-student-finance.

24. Scots students entitled to coronavirus outbreak help with £5m emergency funding. Daily Record. Available at: https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/lifestyle/money/students-entitled-coronavirus-outbreak-help-21834453

25. M. Donnelly and S. Gamsu (2018) Home and Away. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/home-and-away-student-mobility/