

Assessing the early impact of school and college closures on students in England

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Key findings

- Access to tech is proving to be a barrier to some students' learning. Most of the students we surveyed have access to at least a mobile phone and a laptop in their household, but some students flagged that they had to share these devices with other household members
- A fifth of the students we surveyed, and 30% of disadvantaged students, do not have access to a quiet study space in their homes
- Most students reported no change to their family dynamic as a result of school closure. However, where students did report a change this tended to be negative
- On average, students' self-reported wellbeing was significantly below normal levels in the population as a whole, taken outside the period of school closure
- Students are overwhelmingly concerned with their grades, with many telling us they now feel less control over their own destinies
- Most students were happy with the support they were receiving from their school or college. When we asked students how support could be improved, the most common request was for more or better communication

Introduction

This report explores the experiences of young people following the closure of schools in England on 20th March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It forms part of a wider programme of rapid response research into the impact of school closure on young people, parents, teachers and outreach professionals, conducted by the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter and the Centre for Education and Youth.

Since school closures were announced, the research community has rapidly mobilised to explore the potential social, psychological, developmental, and academic impact on young people (Cresswell 2020; Nuffield Foundation 2020; National Youth Agency 2020; UK Youth 2020) the implications for the management of educational institutions (Viner et al. 2020) and wider implications for social mobility (Montacute 2020). The particular value of this report is the wealth of qualitative data it draws on, which provides valuable insights into

young people's concerns, hopes and plans in the initial weeks after schools closed, alongside headline trends in behaviours and attitudes.

The report concludes with a range of practical recommendations for action that could be taken to mitigate the negative impacts of these uncertain times on young people's lives, as well as recommendations for future research.

Methodology

This report is based on a survey of 230 young people aged 16+ in England. Ethical approval was received from the University of Exeter to undertake this survey. The survey was designed collaboratively by a working group established for the project, consisting of academics and associates of the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, and researchers at the Centre for Education and Youth. Participants were recruited via open calls on social media and personal networks. The survey window ran from 28th March to 20th April 2020. Respondents were incentivised with voluntary participation in a £50 prize draw or a donation to ChildLine for completed surveys.

This report forms part of a wider programme of rapid response research which is exploring emerging developments at a time of great uncertainty and volatility. Our survey ran during the early stages of school closure, and therefore may not reflect more recent changes in young people's attitudes and behaviours. Due to our method of recruitment, our sample is not representative of the wider student population in England, and there is likely to be response bias, with particular types of students more likely to engage than others.

Respondent profile

Collectively, the survey yielded 230 responses. Respondents were predominantly:

- female (74%)
- Year 13 students (63%)
- studying for A levels (83%)
- never eligible for free school meals (69%, compared to 72% in the mainstream secondary school population)
- without a special educational need or disability (81%, compared to 87.5% in the mainstream secondary school population)
- from non-fee-paying schools (students attending fee-paying schools form 6% of our sample, broadly in line with the national rate)

In other words, while the sample does not claim to be representative, it captures a range of respondent demographics including students attending different types of school or college, those eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs. Participation from areas in each IMD quintile was largely evenly spread, although representation from each POLAR4 quintile was less evenly spread, with a slight skew towards areas of higher HE participation. Students studying for vocational qualifications such as BTECs and Level 3 NVQs are underrepresented in our data, comprising just 3% of

the sample. 3% of students responding to our survey were currently attending school or college, either because they were deemed vulnerable, or were from key-worker families at the time of responding.

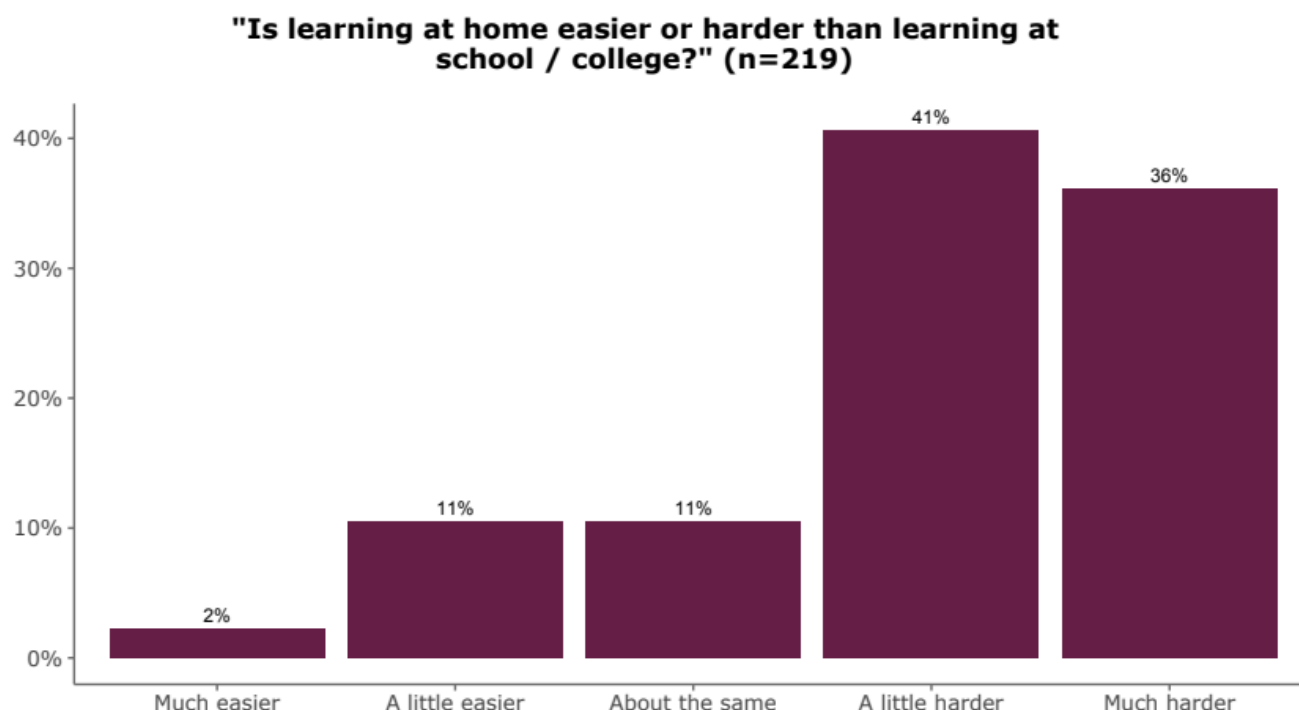
A full demographic breakdown of respondents can be found in Appendix A.

1 Home learning

1.1 Comparing school-based and home-based learning

The majority of respondents to our survey (77%) felt that learning at home was harder than learning at school or college (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Students cited the lack of in-person teaching as the main reason for finding home-based learning more challenging (see Figure 2). Many participants felt that learning over video-conferencing software or working from online resources impaired teachers' ability to adapt their teaching to the needs of all learners, and to respond to issues that could be easily identified and dealt with in a classroom environment.

"In person teachers are much more able to identify whether the class understand and if not they can adapt their explanation in order to

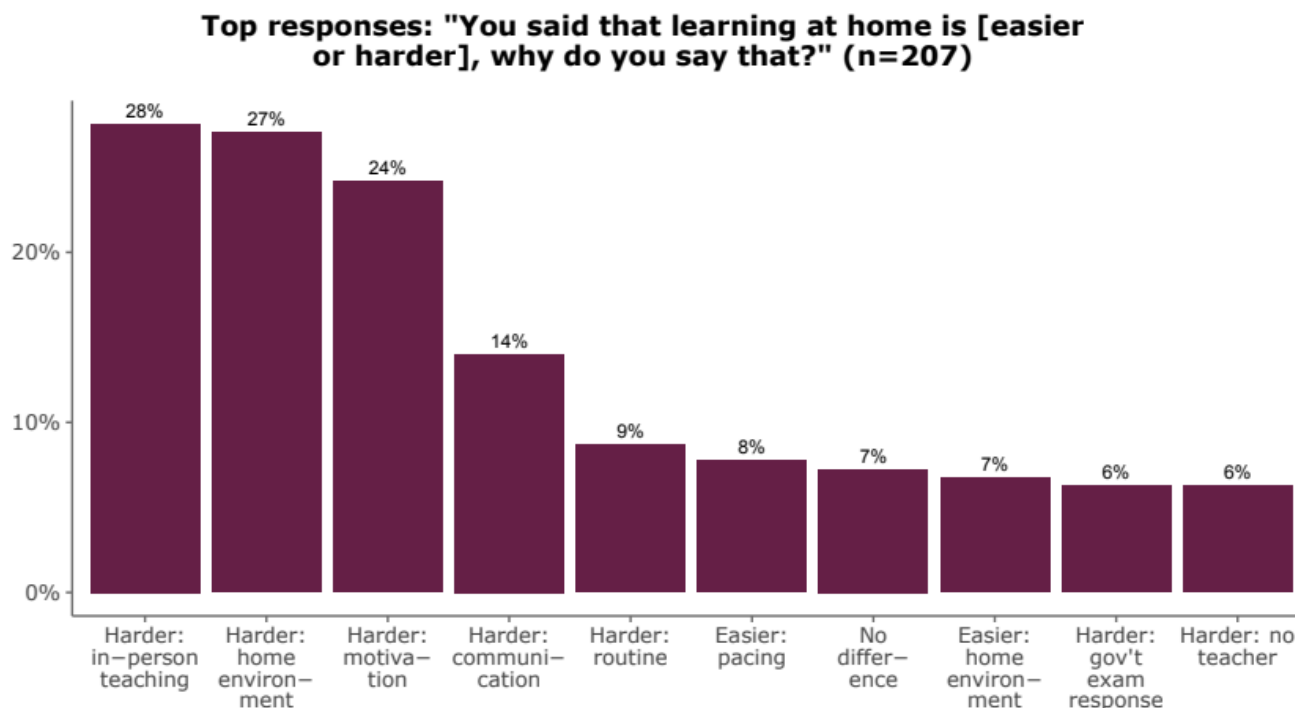
help. Whereas online it's the student's own responsibility to interpret the information." (Female Y13 student)

The second and third most common reasons for finding home learning more difficult were finding the home environment an inadequate learning space, and a lack of motivation. These two issues were often raised in combination.

"It's a lot harder to motivate and concentrate at home. You associate home with doing no work whereas school is a place you associate with work. There is [sic] teachers and other students there to help motivate you and help you learn." (Female Y13 student)

"At sixthform [sic] you're in a learning environment so feel more motivated to do work and the teachers are there to help you and are always accessible." (Female Y13 FE college student)

Figure 2

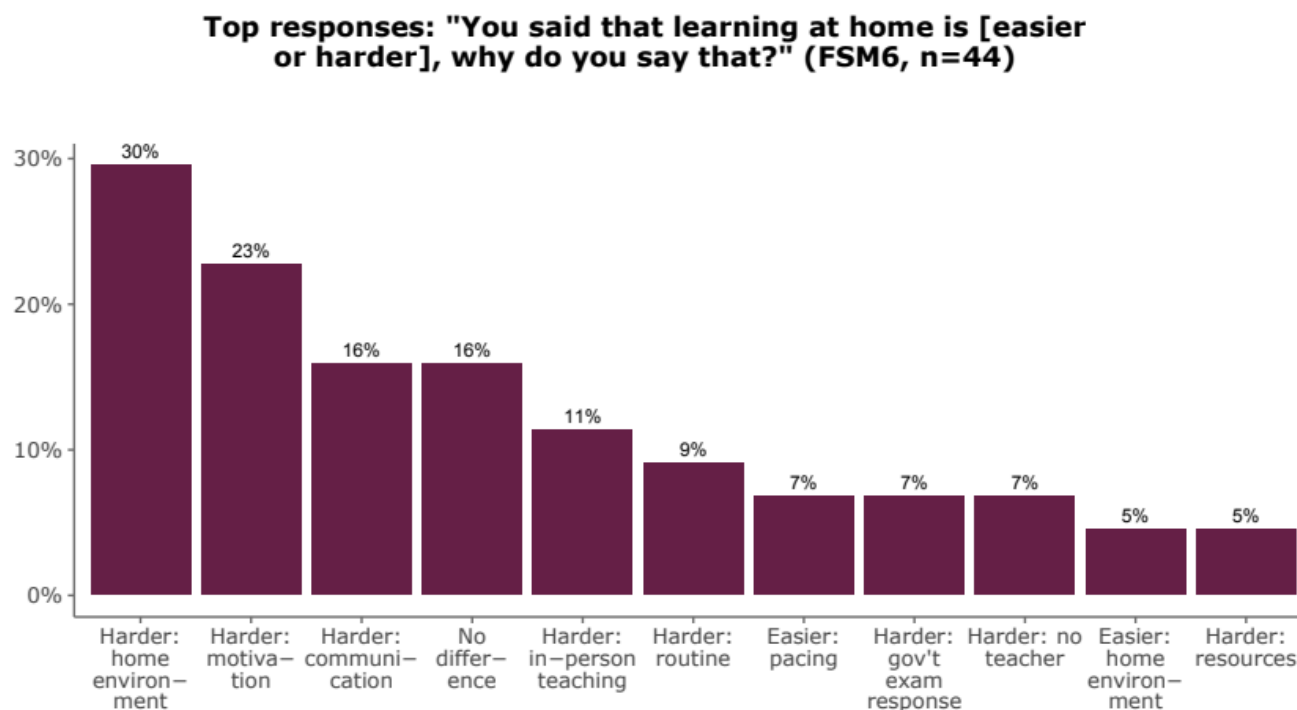


The views of students eligible for Pupil Premium appeared to be somewhat different, with the presence of a teacher less of a priority issue for this group (Figure 3). Instead, motivation and poor home learning environments were the top two reasons why they were finding home-based learning harder.

"It is very hard to remain motivated in the house. I have only one area at which I can complete my lessons so spending practically all

day in the same spot of my house is emotionally and physically exhausting.” (Female Y12 FE college student, currently FSM-eligible)

Figure 3



1.2 Access to study spaces

Access to a quiet area in which to study at home appeared to be an issue for a sizeable minority of students we surveyed, particularly disadvantaged students. As shown in Figure 4, a fifth of all students reported that they did not have access to a quiet study space in their homes. This figure varied from 16% for non-Pupil Premium students, to 29% for Pupil Premium students. Even when students do have access to a quiet study space at home, they often have to compete with other family members to use it. This appeared to be more critical for Pupil Premium students, who were less likely to report that the quiet study space in their home was readily available for them to use (see Figure 5). These results indicate a key way in which home-based learning has the potential to exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Montacute 2020).

Figure 4

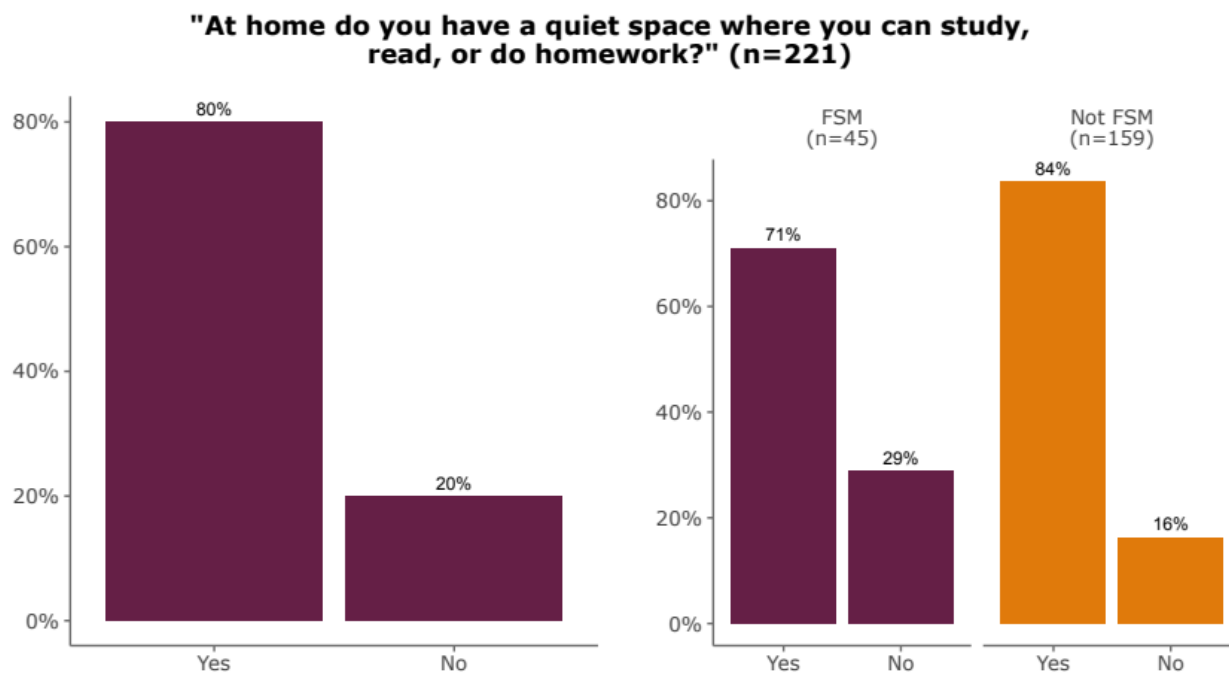
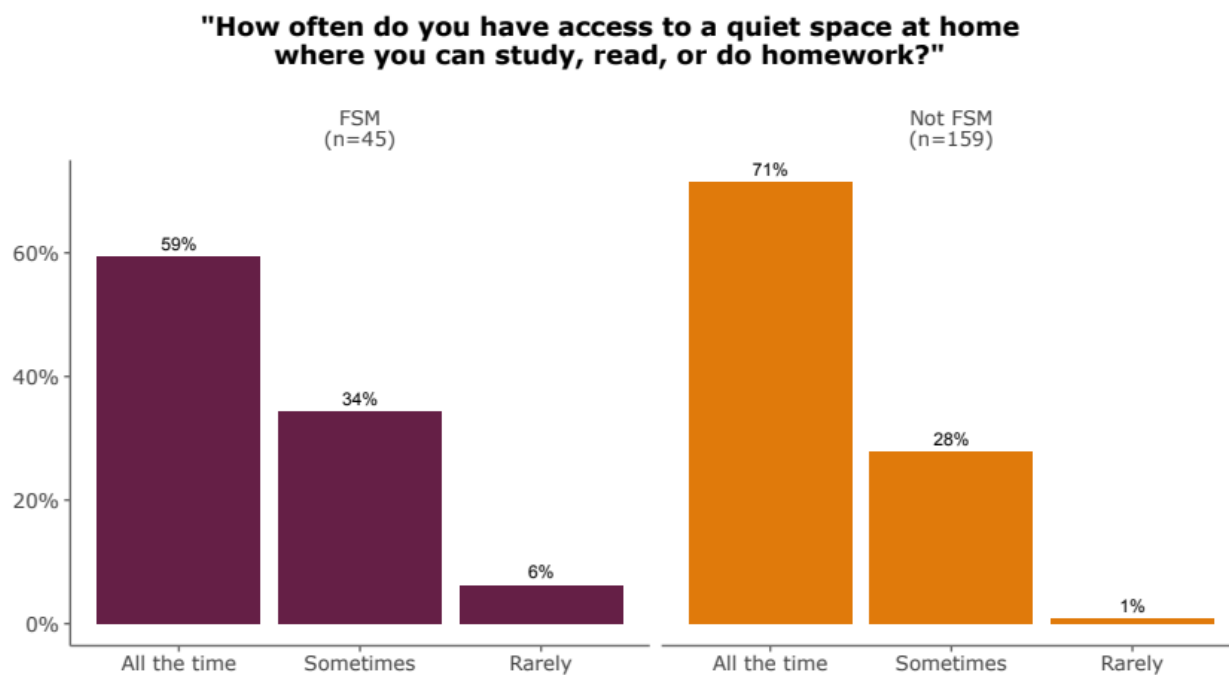


Figure 5



1.3 Access to technology

All of the respondents to our survey reported that they had access to the internet in their homes. However, the devices used to access the internet varied considerably between groups of students.

Figure 6 shows the most common sets of devices available to respondents¹. Most students had access to at least a mobile phone and a laptop (88%), and commonly a tablet as well (48%). While there did not appear to be any significant differences in the device types available to Pupil Premium and non-Pupil Premium students, respondents attending fee-paying schools did appear to have access to more types of devices.

We did not gather data on the number of each type of device available to respondents within their household, but this was highlighted as a barrier to learning by some participants. As with quiet study spaces, even when households have multiple devices to access the internet, these are often rationed between different family members. Participants also suggested that the quality of their learning varied between different types of device, with some expressing a specific desire for access to a laptop.

"[Learning at home is harder because] I don't have a laptop Plus [sic] it gets difficult to stay motivated" (Female Y13 student, currently FSM-eligible)

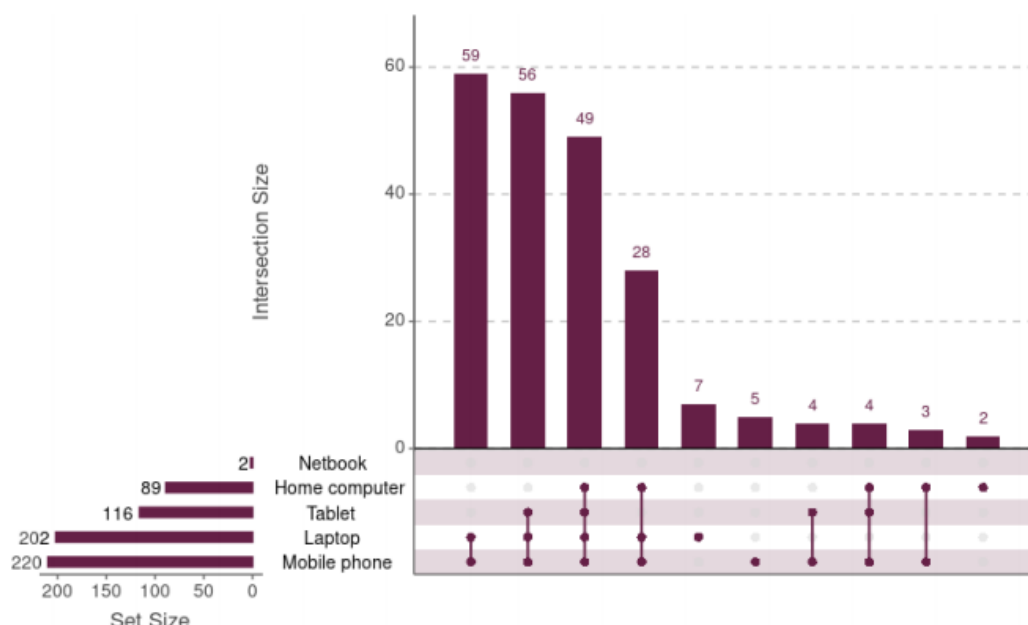
"[I would like] Another laptop as me and my sister are sharing" (Female Y13 student)

At the end of this report we make recommendations for government action, and further research, to address these points.

¹ These figures are 'UpSet' diagrams. The diagrams illustrate which responses co-occurred with other responses and how frequent these combinations were. The dots joined by lines represent an intersection of two or more co-occurring responses, with the vertical bars in the diagram indicating the size of the intersection. The horizontal bars to the side of each set represent the size of each individual set: the number of times that response was given either in combination with another or on its own. In this case, an intersection represents a combination of device types, the vertical bar shows how many respondents gave that particular combination, and the horizontal bar shows how many respondents gave an individual device type in any combination. For example, the first intersection is of 'Laptop' and 'Mobile phone', with its vertical bar indicating that 59 young people reported having access to this combination of devices. 202 young people mentioned a laptop and 220 mentioned a mobile phone in any combination of devices (or on its own). For more information, see the [original UpSet paper](#) by Lex *et al.* (2014), and the [paper detailing the UpSetR software](#) by Conway *et al.* (2017) used to generate the diagrams in this report.

Figure 6

**"How does your household access the internet from home?"
(n=221)**



1.4 Impact on the family

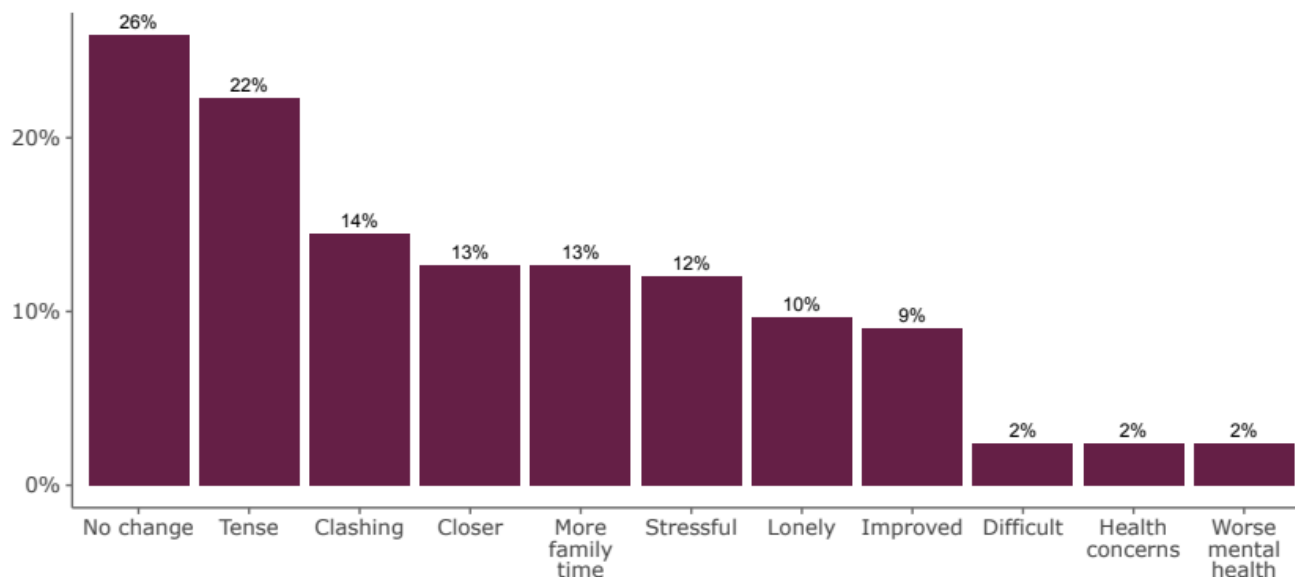
We asked young people to describe in their own words how their family dynamics had changed as a result of school closure. A quarter of respondents reported no change (see Figure 7). Of the remaining responses, the majority described negative changes including increased stress, tension, poorer mental health, and loneliness. Despite this, a number of students also reported positive changes to family relationships such as being closer, and having more family time. Many students described a combination of positive and negative changes occurring simultaneously since schools had closed.

"[Family relationships] have become more strained with all members of the family either having to work from home or taking exams this summer." (Male Y13 FE college student)

"Everyone is slightly more irritable, however we have also found more time to do things together as a family which has been really nice considering we don't always do that while myself and siblings are at school." (Female Y13 girls' school student)

Figure 7

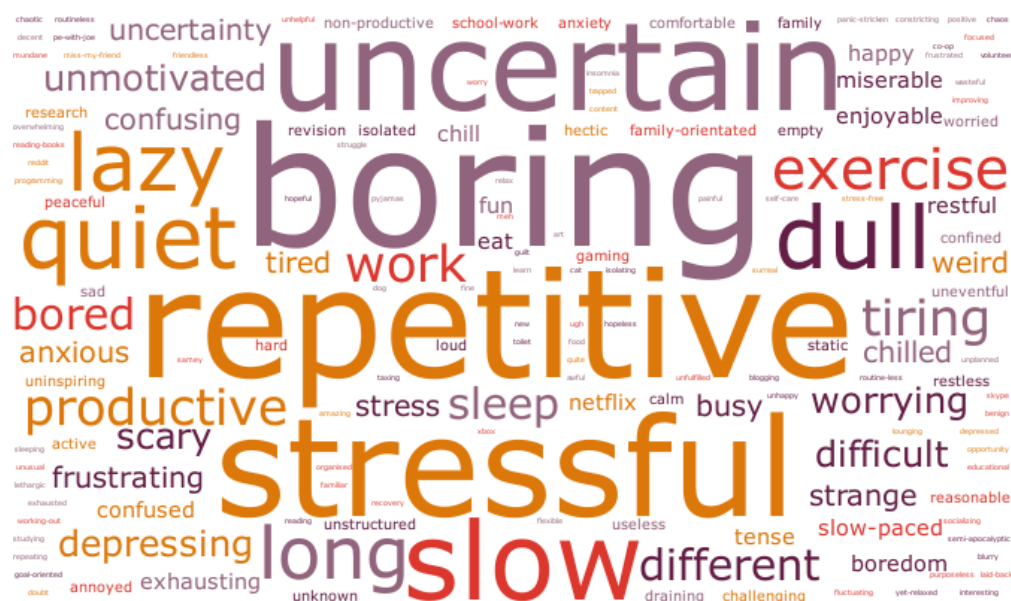
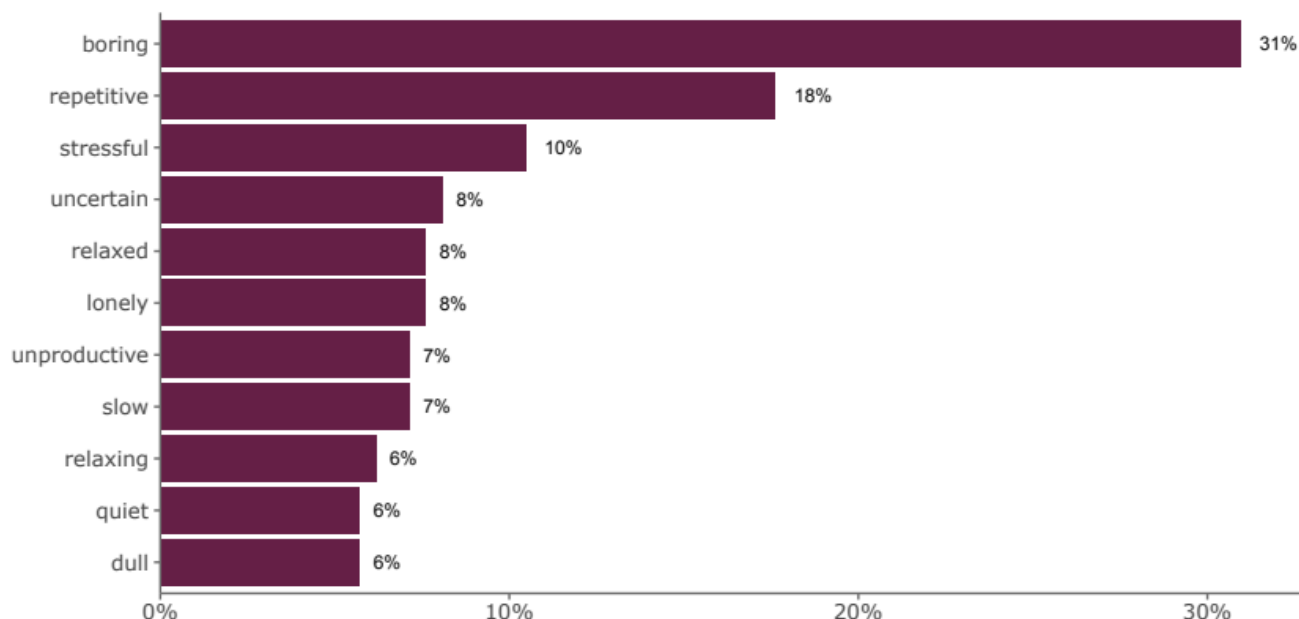
**Top responses: "What, if any, has been the impact on family relationships at home since your school / college closed?"
(n=166)**



2 Wellbeing

When asked to describe current day-to-day life in three words, around a third of students (31%) expressed boredom and around a fifth (18%) described life as repetitive (see Figure 8). However, 14% of respondents described life as "relaxed" or "relaxing". As with students' descriptions of family relationships, feelings about life under lockdown were often mixed.

"Please describe day-to-day life at the moment in three words" (n=210)



To assess their wellbeing respondents completed a Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (S-WEMWBS). Young people's median wellbeing score was significantly lower than that of the general population under normal conditions², at 19.3 compared to 23.2.

The students we surveyed generally had higher self-reported wellbeing if they had access to a quiet study space, were happy with the support they were receiving from their school or college, had plans in place for the future, or felt they had a good chance of going to university. While these associations are statistically significant, they are only weak-to-moderate in size, and we cannot infer a causal link between these aspects of students' lockdown lives and their wellbeing. We found differences in the average, and distribution, of wellbeing scores between different groups of students in our survey (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). The limited size and unrepresentative nature of our sample limits what we can infer from these differences, but they warrant further research, and we make recommendations to that effect at the end of our report. We also recommend that Multi-Academy Trusts, Local Authorities, and schools and colleges should review the support for mental health that they are able to offer students as a matter of priority.

² According to the [official S-WEMWBS guidance](#), the most recent benchmark median S-WEMWBS metric score for the general population under normal conditions is 23.21.

Figure 10

S-WEMWBS metric score (n=220)

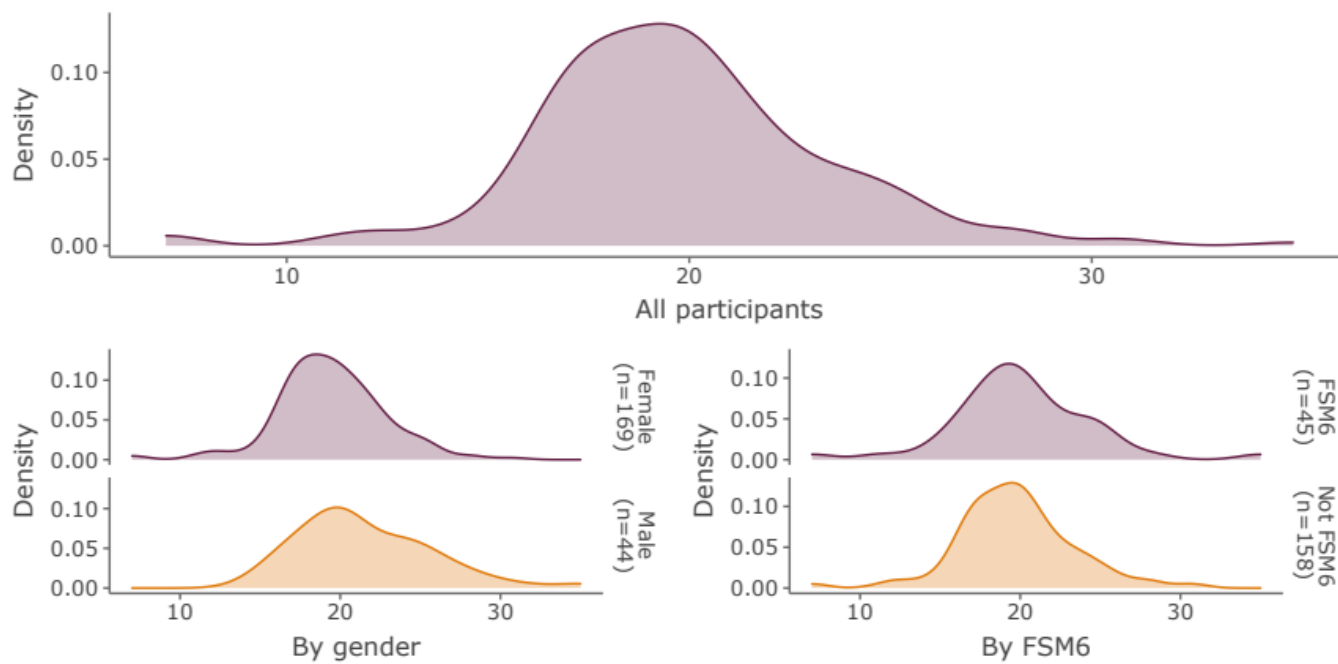


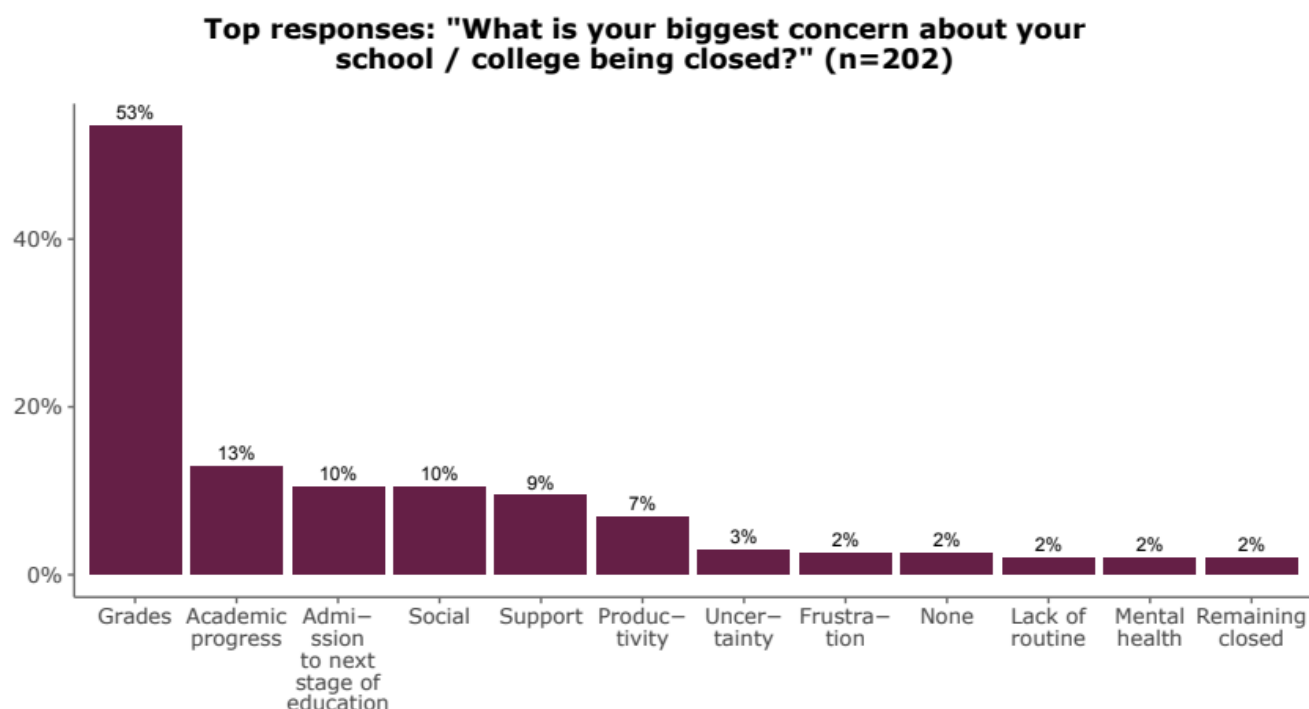
Figure 11

Group	Median wellbeing score
General population under normal circumstances	23.21
All	19.25
Male	20.36
Female	19.25
FSM6	19.98
Non-FSM6	19.62
Fee-paying	19.98
Non-fee-paying	19.25

3 Concerns and worries

When asked about their biggest concern regarding school and college closures, over half of the students we surveyed (53%) mentioned worries about their grades (see Figure 12). This was the standout concern voiced by the young people we surveyed. More granular analysis of free-text responses revealed that students were concerned about how their grades would be allocated if they were due to take A levels this year, whether predicted grades would reflect their true ability and, in the case of Year 12 students, how missed school time would affect their attainment in exams next year.

Figure 12



Many students expressed a sense of powerlessness in their open responses; a feeling that they were no longer able to influence their own grades, and that they would not be able to demonstrate their full potential through a formal examination. There was a general sense that predicted grades would be lower than they would otherwise have been.

"[My biggest concern is that] I won't be able to achieve high grades as I have no control over how my grades are given, and I didn't perform as well as I could have in previous mock exams, as I [had] other commitments." (Female Y13 student)

Young people's responses also indicated that they felt confusion around how their grades would be calculated and awarded.

13

'Society should ensure that all children and young people make a fulfilling transition to adulthood'

"[My biggest concern is] the grades they are going to reward [sic] me as although I did well at school, I am concerned about them basing it off GCSE grades too." (Female Y13 student, currently FSM-eligible)

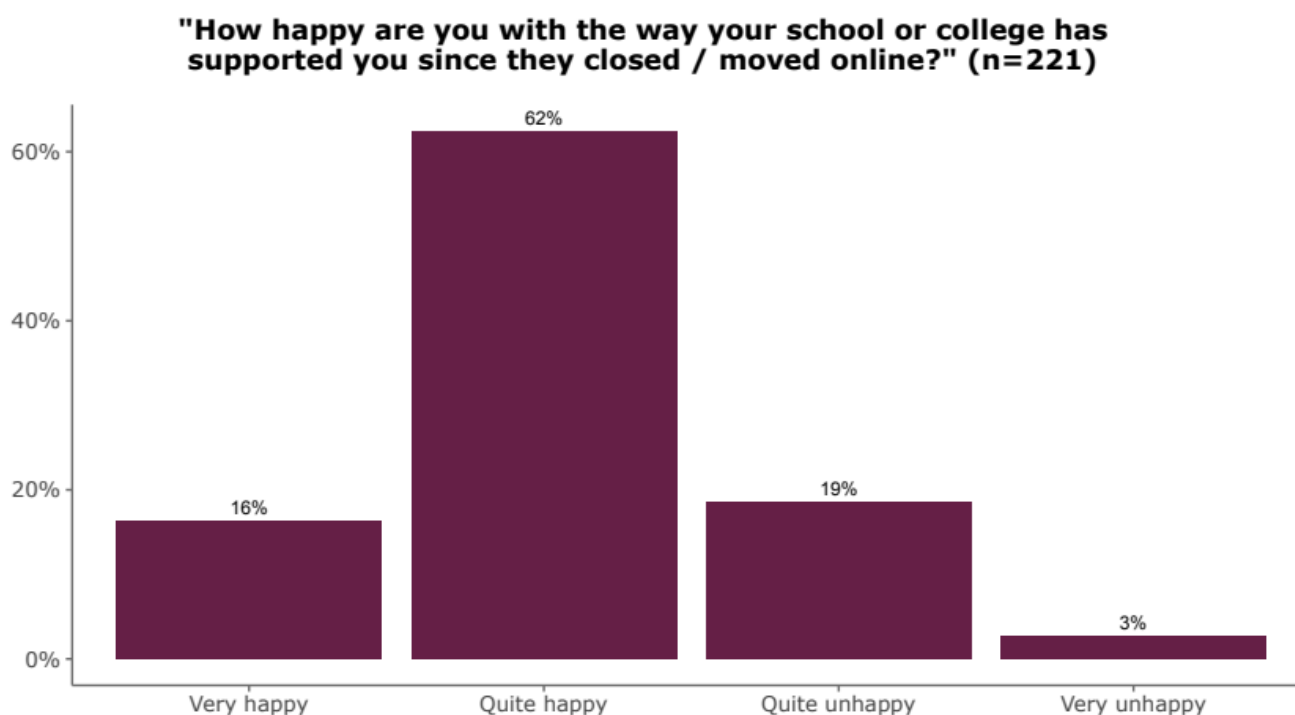
"[My biggest concern is] Teachers lowering predicted grades from what they have previously said, for fear of being penalised if they cannot provide enough evidence e.g. on UCAS and on progress reports." (Female Y13 student, currently FSM-eligible)

At the end of this report we make recommendations for government, and for schools, which could help to relieve students' uncertainty relating to grades and progression to the next stage of their education.

4 School support

The majority (78%) of students responding to our survey said they were happy with the way their school or college has continued to support them since closure (see Figure 13).

Figure 13



When asked what more their schools could be doing, the most common response was to request more or better communication. As shown in Figure 14, the desire for better communication often related to the uncertainty surrounding exam cancellations and the calculation of grades:

"Tell us more! I feel like I'm still in the dark, whether this is because exams [sic] boards don't know anything." (Female Y13 student)

"It's not [the school's] fault, but I'm still having to do coursework projects for some subjects not knowing if the exam boards are going to want them handed in or not, and if the deadlines will be extended. It's very stressful but the school and teachers are keeping me as informed as they can." (Male Y13 student)

However, many respondents simply requested 'contact' or a change in the amount of communication:

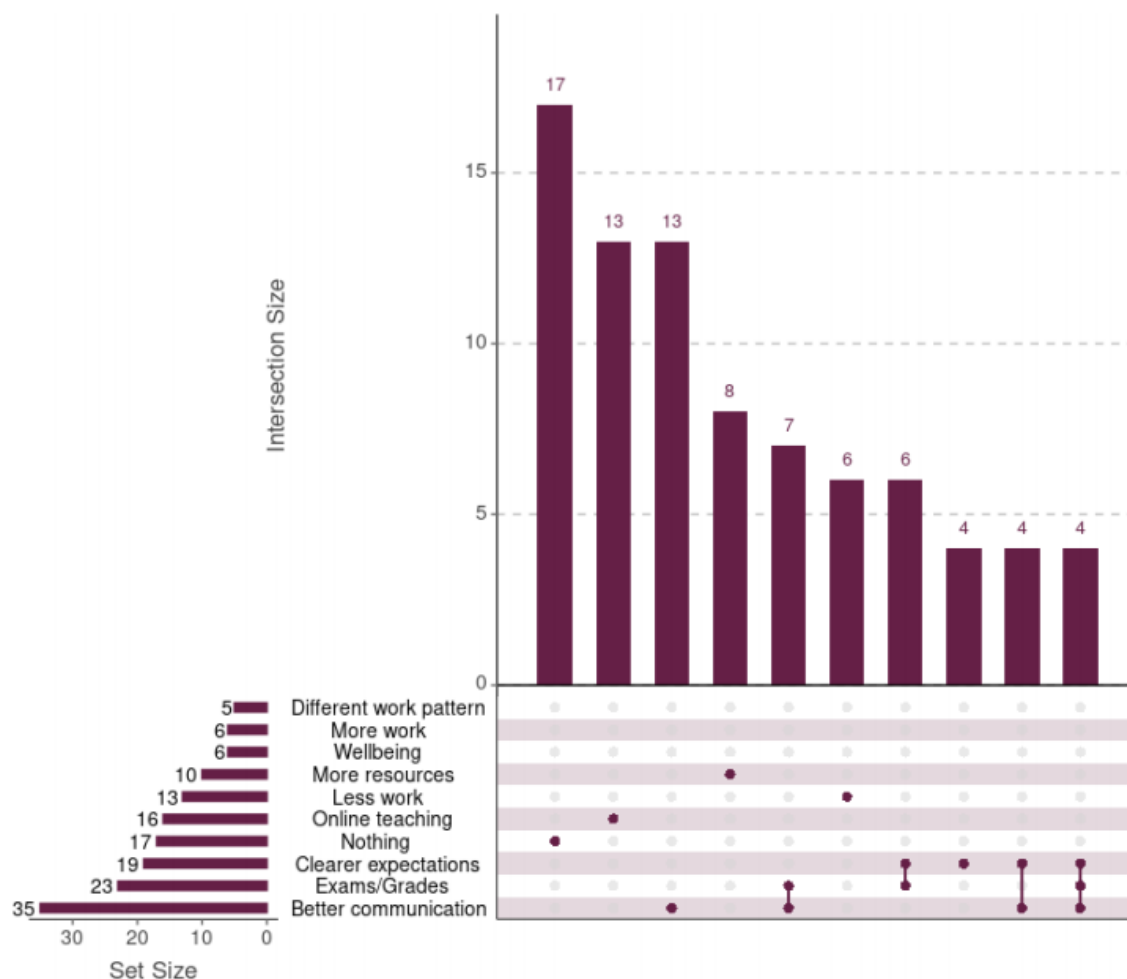
"Contact us more often to answer our questions and ensure we feel good about the future" (Female Y13 student, FSM6)

"Less [sic] emails" (Female Y13 fee-paying student, FSM6)

"More consistent email replies" (Male Y13 student)

Figure 14

**"Is there anything that they could do to help you more?"
(n=118)**



5 Future plans

Most students (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had plans in place for the future (see Figure 15). However, disadvantaged students appeared to be somewhat less certain about their plans, as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 15

"I have plans in place for my future" (n=220)

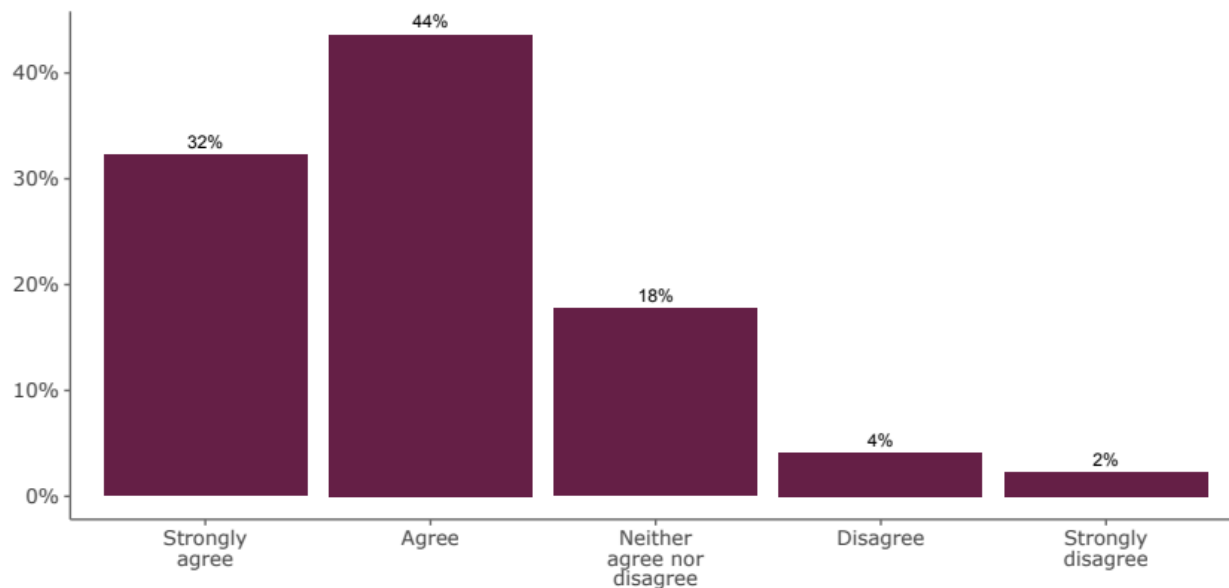
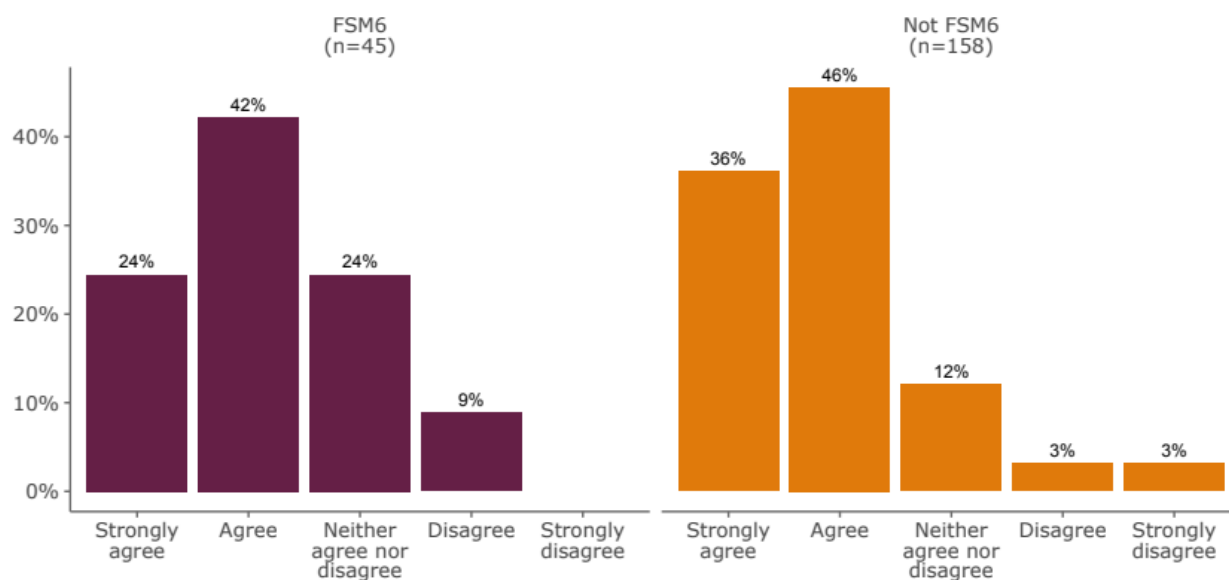


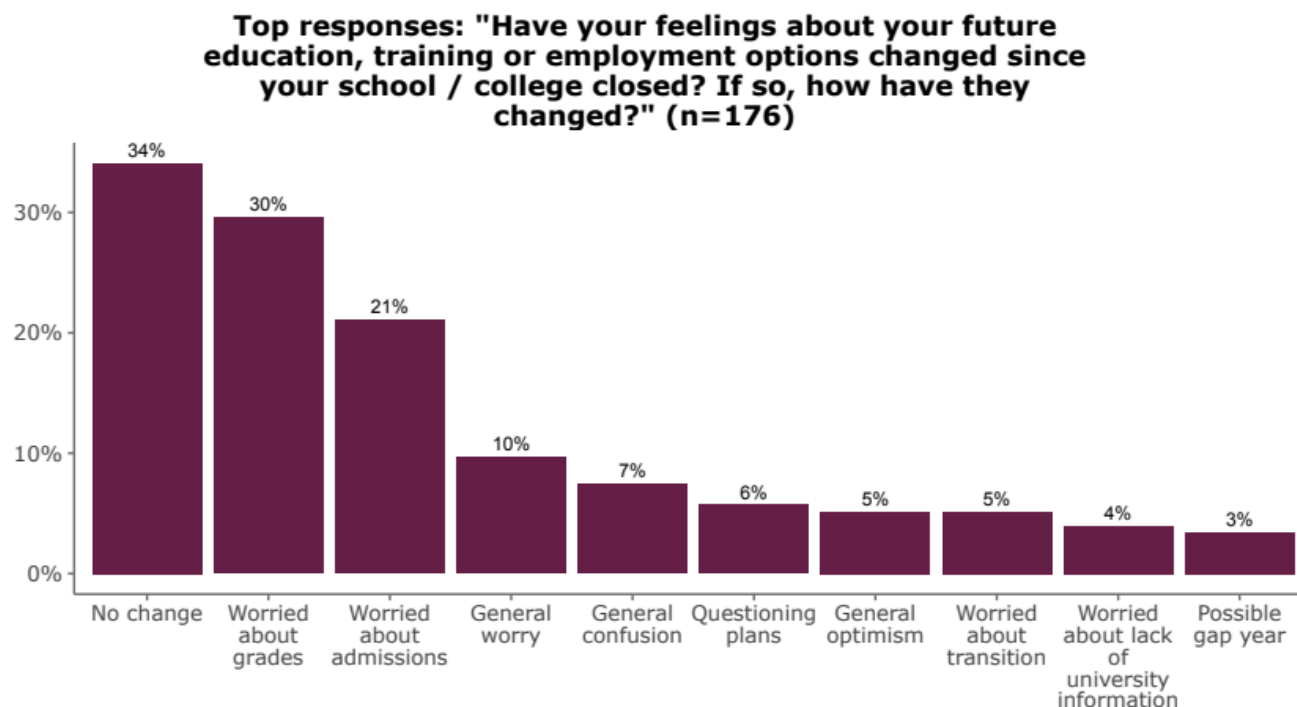
Figure 16

"I have plans in place for my future"



A third of the students we surveyed told us their feelings about future education, training and employment options had not changed since schools and colleges closed (see Figure 17). However, a similar proportion reported being more concerned about grades, and a fifth told us they were more worried about admissions.

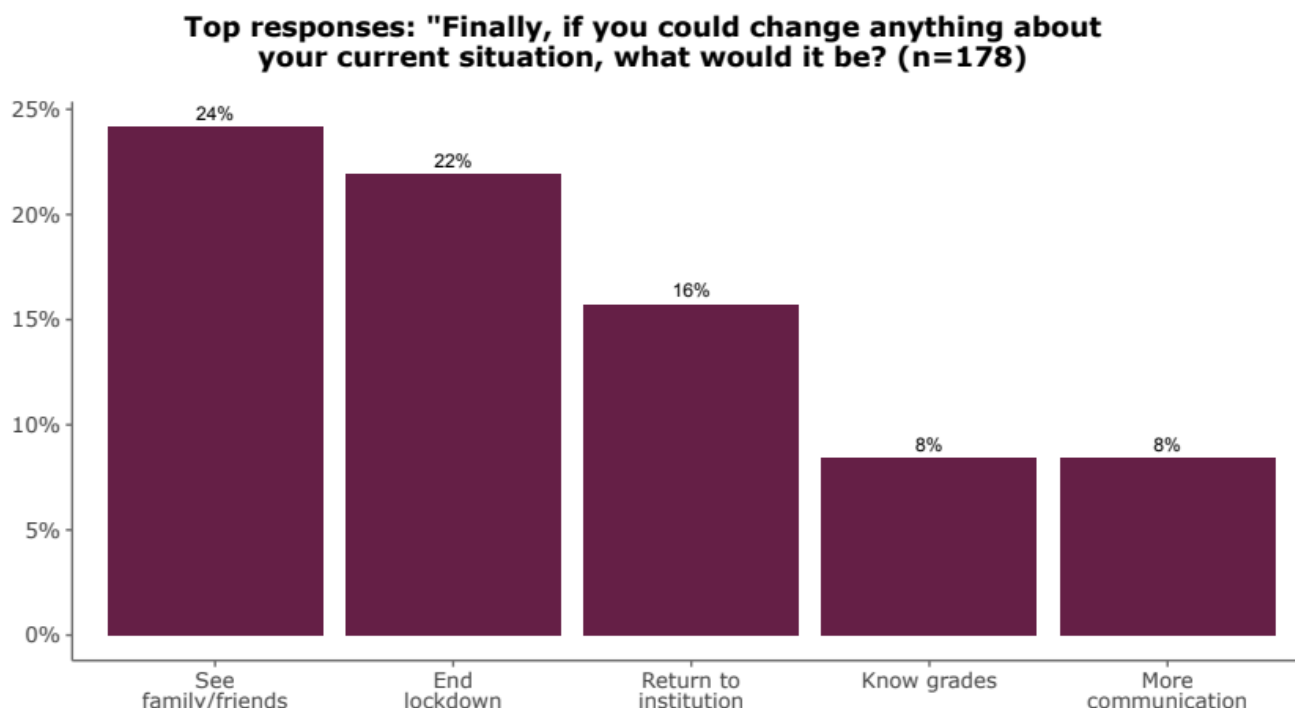
Figure 17



Finally, we asked students what they would most like to change about the current situation (see Figure 18). Students were most concerned with seeing their family and friends, emerging from lockdown, and going back to school:

"I would change literally everything and go back to before this happened so I could go back to living my normal life and seeing my friends everyday" (Female Y13 FE college student)

Figure 18



6 Conclusions

- The majority of students we surveyed feel that learning at home is harder than learning in school or college, largely due to the loss of in-person interaction with a teacher in an environment that supports learning. Most students reported having access to at least a mobile phone and a laptop at home, but the number of devices available in the household appears to be a barrier to learning for some.
- One fifth of all respondents to our survey do not have access to a quiet study space in their homes, rising to a third among disadvantaged students. Disadvantaged young people who do have a quiet space to study at home are also less likely to have regular access to this space.
- Most students did not report a change to their family dynamic as a result of school and college closures. While many reported negative changes, such as increased tension, these often sat alongside positive changes such as being able to spend more time together, and feeling closer.
- The self-reported wellbeing of the students we surveyed appears to be significantly below the levels we would expect in the population in normal times. When we asked

students to describe current day-to-day life, boredom and repetition were the most commonly-voiced sentiments.

- Uncertainty surrounding grades was by far the most significant concern held by the students we surveyed, with many feeling less in control of their own destinies than before schools closed and exams were cancelled.
- Most students were happy with the support that they have received from their school or college. The most common request was for more or better communication.

7 Recommendations for schools and policymakers

- **Schools should continue to engage and communicate with students, even when they are no longer teaching or preparing these groups for exams.** Our research chimes with other recent surveys that have found schools and colleges are less likely to engage with students in Year 13 in particular. While the reasons schools are not continuing to teach this year group are understandable, schools and colleges should consider other ways to engage. In particular, our research shows that students are concerned about the impact of school and college closures on their qualifications, and what this might mean for their transition to HE or the workplace. Schools and colleges should provide individual advice and support for all students in Year 13 on their next steps, including their options for re-sitting exams and what options exist for HE admissions, including clearing.
- **The Department for Education should work to disseminate its advice and guidance on qualifications accessibly.** The DfE should fund a campaign to ensure all students in Years 11 and 13 are able to access its advice on how grades are allocated, and the options available for appeals and resits. This campaign should use channels that young people use regularly and are familiar with, and should be published in a variety of forms so that students with SEND are able to access it. In addition, the DfE should repurpose the UCAS clearing helpline to provide support and guidance for students in June, July and August 2020.
- **For students returning to school or college, Multi-Academy Trusts, Local Authorities, and schools and colleges themselves should review the support for mental health that they are able to offer students.** Our findings show that almost all young people are experiencing lower levels of wellbeing than under normal circumstances. Much of this lower wellbeing is characterized by stress and anxiety. In addition, some students will return to school having experienced bereavement as a result of Covid-19.

Early intervention will be needed when students return to schools and colleges, to ensure their wellbeing does not dip further. Schools and colleges should review potential risk factors for student wellbeing within their community, using tools such as the NCB's whole school framework for emotional health and wellbeing.

Expert support is also needed within schools and colleges to ensure that pupils with known clinical mental health needs are adequately supported day-to-day. MATs, LAs, schools and colleges should plan in advance to ensure they have access to mental-health and bereavement services experts, potentially shared between a number of schools and colleges to make support more affordable.

- **The Department for Education should extend its free laptop scheme to disadvantaged Year 12s.** Our findings show that lower income Key Stage 5 students are more likely to lack access to devices than other KS5 students. The DfE should ensure that Year 12 pupils who are eligible for the Pupil Premium are also able to access its free laptop scheme.

8 Recommendations for future research

- Our analysis suggests that many students are struggling with their mental wellbeing during the period of school closure, due primarily to the loss of routine and social contact, and the uncertainty they are feeling about the future. The situation is changeable, and young people are likely to be pursuing different strategies to cope. Longitudinal research, assessing the wellbeing of a representative sample of young people at regular points during the crisis, would allow trends to be tracked over time, as well as providing a robust assessment of any differences in wellbeing between subgroups.
- The digital divide has been thrown into sharp relief since schools and colleges closed, with many young people lacking access to internet-enabled devices in the home, or struggling to secure regular access to devices that are shared with other people in the household. Even where devices are readily available, the students responding to our survey suggested that the quality of their online learning varied between different types of device. Future edtech research should explore the cross-cutting impact of both device scarcity and device type on young people's home-based learning.

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Appendix A: demographic breakdown of respondents

Breakdown of respondents by gender

Gender	Count	Proportion
Female	170	74%
Male	44	19%
No response	9	4%
Other	4	2%
Prefer not to say	3	1%

Breakdown of respondents by SEND

SEND	Count	Proportion
Non-SEND	186	81%
SEND	27	12%
No response	11	5%
Don't know	6	3%

Breakdown of respondents by free-school-meals eligibility

Eligibility	Count	Proportion
Never	159	69%
Not currently, but I have been at some point in the last 6 years	24	10%
Yes, currently	21	9%
Don't know	17	7%
No response	9	4%

Breakdown of respondents by study status

Status	Count	Proportion
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Status	Count	Proportion
Studying at home or online because my school or college is closed	211	92%
No response	12	5%
Attending school or college	6	3%
Studying at home, but I have been home-educated for a long time	1	0%

Breakdown of respondents by school year

Year	Count	Proportion
Year 13	145	63%
Year 12	55	24%
Other	11	5%
Year 11	10	4%
No response	9	4%

Breakdown of respondents by school type

Type	Count	Proportion
Mixed	141	61%
Not fee paying (state) school	122	53%
Further Education College	63	27%
Grammar school	22	10%
Single Sex	19	8%
Fee paying (private) school	13	6%
No response	9	4%

Type	Count	Proportion
Other (e.g. Religious school, Special school)	7	3%

Breakdown of respondents by qualifications currently being studied for

Studying	Count	Proportion
Mostly A Levels	192	83%
Mostly GCSEs	11	5%
No response	9	4%
Post 18 qualification	7	3%
BTEC	5	2%
Other	4	2%
Other Level 3 qualification (e. g. Level 3 NVQ, advanced apprenticeship)	2	1%

Breakdown of respondents by IMD quintile

Quintile	Count	Proportion
2	46	20%
4	44	19%
3	40	17%
5	38	17%
No response	35	15%
1	27	12%

Breakdown of respondents by POLAR4 quintile

Quintile	Count	Proportion
3	61	27%
2	40	17%
5	37	16%
No response	35	15%
4	34	15%
1	23	10%

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