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Evidence for the Select Committee Education Enquiry: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.

The effects of school closure – a survey of teachers, parents, young people and outreach staff.

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Motivation: We are a group of researchers committed to understanding and enhancing equity in education. We came together under the umbrella of the Centre for Social Mobility at Exeter University, and the Centre for Education and Youth partnership (CfEY), to conduct rapid-response survey research into the impact of school closures. Our survey took place between March 28th and April 20th 2020, had 2219 responses, and is the basis of the evidence submitted here.

Executive Summary:

1. ### Support for pupils and families during closures.

    1.1. Lack of access to technology is a barrier to learning for some students. Most of the students we surveyed had access to (at least) a mobile phone and a laptop in their household, but some students reported that they had to **share these devices**, and some expressed a specific desire for access to a laptop.

    1.2. Students attending **fee-paying schools had access to more types of devices** for accessing remote learning opportunities.

    1.3. Outreach professionals raised concerns about **differential access to technology**: 'I'm worried about our assumption that all learners have access to mobile technology, and a space and the support to access resources. While not all schools are created equal, there is at least something to be said for the school day providing structure and support to students.'

    1.4. There was one example where schools had provided additional laptops to vulnerable students, but where at least **one laptop had been sold within a day,** to fund the drug use of the parents; the same happened to a mobile given to this student by the concerned school. This highlights that the support needed by the most vulnerable students is not solely focused on economic resources.

    1.5. Parents felt that the shut-down of schools presented significant challenges for those **lacking confidence** about the home education of their children.

    1.6. 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.**

2. ### The mental health and safety of children and young people, outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.

    2.1. Outreach and widening-participation professionals were concerned about the **safety, nutrition, wellbeing, academic attainment and progress of students.** 'We have concerns that the young people we support in some of the most deprived areas will now be lacking structure, role models and security' (outreach professional).

    2.2. On average, the self-reported **wellbeing of students was significantly below normal levels in the population** as a whole, taken outside the period of school closure.

    2.3. **Students were overwhelmingly concerned with their grades**, and many expressed **a sense of powerlessness**; 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 in a formal examination. There was a general sense that predicted grades would be lower than they would otherwise have been.

2.4. 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 a negative one.

3. The effect on disadvantaged groups.

3.1. A fifth of the students we surveyed, and 30% of disadvantaged students, **did not have access to a quiet study space in their homes.**

3.2. Parents whose children had never been in receipt of free school meals (FSM) had **a higher level of confidence** about their children's education while schools are closed.

3.3. Outreach professionals were concerned about **differential abilities of parents to support students** during this time: 'At this time more reliance is being placed on home support. This therefore favours those with parents with the knowledge and skills to support home schooling. Similarly, Higher Education Information Advice and Guidance is reliant on parental knowledge to support students. Therefore, people whose parents don't have this knowledge, or who are estranged from them, are disadvantaged at this time.'

3.4. All parents reported a **reduction in school contact**. However, this was less pronounced among better-off parents.

3.5. We found no significant correlation between levels of school support and whether the parents had a child with special educational needs and disabilities.

3.6. Outreach professionals were concerned that disadvantaged young people are facing **increased pressures to rapidly contribute to stretched household incomes rather than continue in education**. There was also concern about a lack of access to the work experiences required, for admissions to (e.g.) medicine; and that this scarcity of work experience would exacerbate inequalities.

    3.6.1. A third of the outreach professionals we surveyed said they would like to see policy efforts focused on students who had been eligible for FSM. These comments highlight concerns that educational and emotional resilience, as well as levels of support, are lower for students in low-income households compared to their more advantaged peers.

4. What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency.

4.1. **Focus on wellbeing and mental health.**

    4.1.1. The process of setting policy priorities for education in opening schools, and considering longer-term effects of the school closure, needs to include a strong focus on mental health, wellbeing and self-esteem. This is particular true for disadvantaged students, but it is a concern for all students and also for teachers.

    4.1.2. Schools and colleges should review potential risk factors for student wellbeing within their community, using tools such as the National Children's Bureau's 'whole school framework' for emotional health and wellbeing.

    4.1.3. Expert support is also needed within schools and colleges to ensure that pupils with known clinical mental-health needs are adequately supported. Multi-academy trusts, local authorities, 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.

4.2. **Resource Planning.**

    4.2.1. The Department for Education should extend its free laptop scheme to disadvantaged Year 12 pupils. Our findings show that lower-income Key Stage 5 students are more likely to lack access to devices than other KS5 students.

    4.2.2. Online resources and support should all be mobile-friendly, as many learners do not have access to computers. Resources could be tailored to disadvantaged groups. As well as taking an area-

based approach (based on, for example, the Index of Multiple Deprivation), targeting should include young carers, and those eligible for FSM.

4.2.3.   At the same time, the most vulnerable and at-risk students need additional support beyond access to technology; they should be the highest priority for continued contact with professionals, and they need sustained access to food and nutrition. There also needs to be a pathway for taking children out of families where there is concern for their immediate wellbeing, safety and sustenance.

4.2.4.   There were 'silver linings', with some aspects of practice being improved, and with the potential for long-term enhancements to practice after the re-opening of schools. Online provision has great potential to equalise opportunities, as it removes some access barriers. However, as long as information, advice and guidance pointing to online resources is heavily influenced by access to physical resources (e.g. laptops, quiet places to study and different parental abilities to support students) this potential will not be fully realised.

4.2.5.   The positive experiences of off-site teaching are related to teacher confidence, training and technical support, and this knowledge base should be further developed in the future.

4.3. **Consider policies around grades and the impact on widening participation.**

4.3.1.   Consider offering a national programme of online activities/events/webinars, accessible by students and parents.

4.3.2.   Give clear policy guidance, on the use of predicted grades in university admissions, to students in at-risk groups.

4.3.3.   Universities should review their policies on contextual offers and extenuating circumstances offers.

4.3.4.   The DfE should work to disseminate its advice and guidance on qualifications. It 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 it should be published in a variety of forms so that students with special educational needs (SEN) 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.

4.3.5.   All students in Year 13 should be provided, by schools and colleges, with individual advice and support on their next steps. This should include the options for re-sitting exams, and the options for HE admissions, including clearing.

4.4. **Communication.**

4.4.1.   Generally, communication emerged as a key issue in our research. Good communication from schools enabled a better experience of education during the school closure, and lack of communication was the most frequent issue for action raised by parents and students. It might be prudent to develop a communication template for schools should a similar situation arise in the future. Such a template should include strategies for communicating with different year groups; a lack of communication was particularly noted for the Year 13 group.

Research Context:

To contain COVID-19, the UK Government closed all nurseries, schools and colleges on March 20th 2020. Social scientists in the UK and elsewhere predict that school closure will deepen existing inequalities related to education (Banks, Karjalainen, Propper, Stove, and Saranko, 2020); attainment, skills, progression, and social and emotional development.

Less advantaged families face: financial constraints (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003); restricted access to quiet places to study (OECD, 2015); higher levels of stress and insecurity (Lupien, King, Meaney, and McEwen, 2001); lower levels of parental education; and thus, a diminished ability to provide stimulating learning materials and experiences to

their children (Miller, Farkas, Vandell, and Duncan, 2014). Also, there are differences in internet literacy and access (Office for National Statistics, 2019). We therefore expected socioeconomic status, neighbourhood context measured through postcode, school type, parental education, and cultural and social capital to matter for the immediate experience and long-term outcomes of school closure (Grusky, 2014). While state education does not fully close the socioeconomic gaps in children's education, it is effective in reducing the magnitude of these gaps (Raudenbusch & Eschmann, 2015; Roberts, Griggs, and Robb, 2017).

Description of the research:

Our survey, including open-ended questions on the effect of school closure, was available between March 28th and 20th April 2020. Parents, guardians, teachers, outreach professionals and young people aged 16-18 were eligible to participate. The research had ethical approval from the University of Exeter and participation was voluntary; the survey was promoted through social media and networks, and we do not claim that our survey is representative.

Survey responses were time-stamped; 700 responses were registered within the first 48 hours. In total, 2219 responses were received, of which almost half (1093) were parents or guardians. There were 707 responses from teachers, 230 responses from students and 182 from outreach staff (+ a second survey with 80 respondents). Full details are provided in the technical appendix.

Detailed Evidence:

Student Survey – Home-learning, study spaces, technology and the internet.

The majority of our 230 student respondents (77%) felt that learning at home was harder than learning at school or college.

Students cited the lack of in-person teaching as the main reason for finding home-based learning more challenging. However, this was a lower priority for students eligible for FSM, where the top reason for finding home-learning harder was challenges in the home environment.

Many participants felt that learning over video-conferencing software, or working from online resources, impaired the ability of teachers to adapt to the needs of all learners, and to respond to issues that could have been 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)

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. 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)

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 did have access to a quiet study space at home, they often had 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 Figures 1 and 2). These results indicate a key way in which home-based learning has the potential to exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Montacute, 2020).

Figures 1 and 2
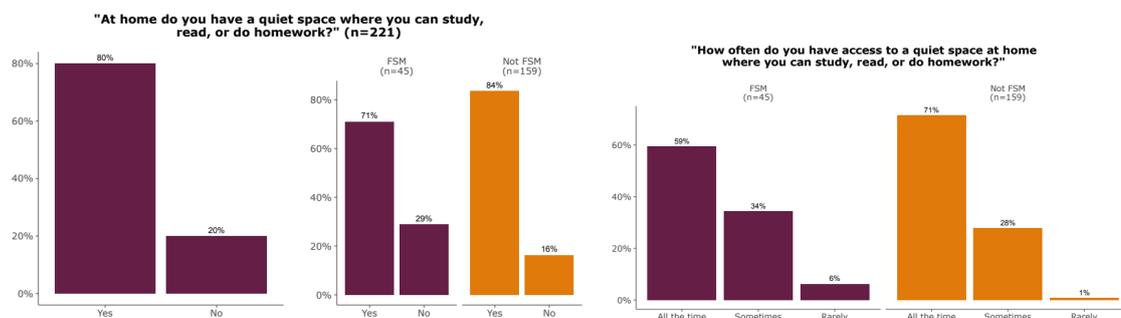
All of the respondents to our survey reported that they had access to the internet in their homes. However, the devices used to access the internet varied considerably between groups of students. Most students had access to at least a mobile phone and a laptop (88%), and commonly a tablet as well (48%). 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 had access to more types of devices.

Participants 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)*

Student Survey – Wellbeing and worries.

To assess their wellbeing, respondents were asked to complete a Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS). Young people's median wellbeing score was significantly lower than that of the general population under normal conditions, at 19.3 compared to 23.21.[1]

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. All of these associations are statistically significant, although we have no way of knowing how these factors impacted wellbeing when schools were open.

When asked about their biggest concern regarding school and college closures, over half of the students we surveyed (53%) mentioned worries about their grades. A finer level of granularity in the analysis of the 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.

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[1] According to the official SWEMWBS guidance, the most recent benchmark median SWEMWBS metric score for the general population under normal conditions is 23.21.

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 in 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.

> *'[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)*

Student Survey – School support.

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

When asked what more their schools could be doing, the most common response was to request more or better communication. 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)*

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)*
>
> *'More consistent email replies' (Male Y13 student)*

Parent Survey Analysis.

We asked parents a series of questions about their feelings regarding their children's education in the current environment. Firstly, parents were asked 'How confident do you currently feel about the education of your child/children at home while schools are closed?' Parents were then asked a follow-up question: 'How much support have you received from the school/college in relation to giving them education at home?' Just over one third of parents reported receiving a lot of support. While it is reassuring that hardly any parents received no support, there was nonetheless a significant proportion who probably did not feel they were getting the support they required.

We then asked: 'How clear are you about what you should be doing to support the education of your child/children while the school is closed?' The responses show that the majority (over 70%) described themselves as 'very' or 'quite' clear.

Bivariate comparisons.

In this section we consider how some of the patterns we have seen above vary with the socioeconomic status of parents, and what changes we can see in parents' opinions about home schooling. Using the question on FSM, and cross-tabulating with the question on parental confidence, it can be seen that parents whose children have never been in receipt of FSM have a higher level of confidence about their children's education while schools are closed. This difference is statistically significant. Another measure of socioeconomic background was a categorical question about the number of books in the household. Using this question led us to the same conclusion: parents of higher socioeconomic status are more confident in dealing with home schooling their children.

Table 1.

Confidence in home schooling	Eligibility for Free School Meals (figures in %)			
	Never	Yes, currently	Yes, in the past	Total
Very Confident	12	7	9	10
Quite Confident	49	39	31	46
Not Very confident	33	46	44	36
Not At All confident	7	8	16	8
Total	100	100	100	100

It is natural to ask whether perceived support from schools varies with the background of parents. The results are more nuanced. While parents whose children had never been in receipt of FSM reported higher levels of support than those whose children had, compared to those currently in receipt, they are not clearly better off. So, it is difficult to arrive at an unambiguous conclusion here.

To get a further sense of what was going on, we asked whether (since the schools closed) they had more, less or the same amount of contact with the school. Only a small proportion reported greater contact. As the largest proportion reported a reduction in contact, we wanted to understand whether this varied with the socioeconomic background of parents; so we cross-tabulated it with the FSM variable. The reduction in school contact is less pronounced among better-off parents. As before, if we use 'number of books in the household' as our indicator, we arrive at the same conclusion. In short, better-off parents send their children to schools which appear to be better at keeping in touch post-shutdown.

Table 2. Change in school contact x FSM status.

Contact from school	Eligibility for Free School Meals (figures in %)			
	Never	Yes, currently	Yes, in the past	Total
More contact	11	15	9	9
About the same	45	34	35	35
Less Contact	45	50	56	56
Total	100	100	100	100

Teacher Survey.

Teachers' positive experiences in off-site teaching was, statistically significantly, predicted by their confidence in using technology, training and technical support. Over 70% of teachers thought that their experience of off-site teaching would enhance their teaching skills. Qualitative comments were made to the effect that more support and guidance was needed to facilitate remote schooling, highlighting a lack of preparedness in some schools. Sometimes

these comments were directed at the school leadership, but more often at government and national bodies. Some of these respondents also described a lack of technology, or a lack of confidence in using the technology.

Outreach and widening participation survey – views on the impact of school closures on students.

Respondents felt that the effects of school closures were likely to cut across all groups of students, although students who already faced disadvantages would be hardest hit. Most concern was about wellbeing and mental health, but there were high levels of concern (around 4 out of 5) across many aspects, such as attainment, progression, and the long-term prospects for disadvantaged students.

Using a scale of 1-5 where 5 is most concerned and 1 is least concerned, please tell us how concerned you are about the impact of school closure for the students you target as part of your Uni Connect partnership?	
	Average (base = 74 respondents)
Attainment	3.8
Progression opportunities	3.9
Wellbeing and mental health	4.4
Long term prospects	3.8
Other*	3.9

*Respondents mentioned aspects related to family dyanmics, social skills.

Around a third of respondents said they would like to see policy efforts focused towards FSM-eligible students. The comments highlighted concerns that educational and emotional resilience, as well as levels of support, are lower for students in low-income households compared to their more advantaged peers. The potentially wide range of problems facing those in households with low income was mentioned, from lack of adequate food or nutritious meals, to insecure housing and increased pressure on families to continue working. This made the carers of these students more distant and less able to provide educational and emotional support; it also increased the risks of their families being directly exposed to the Covid-19 virus, with potentially devastating consequences.

Among other groups affected by school closures, students in the transition stages of education (Years 11 and 13) were the ones most often mentioned by the Uni Connect respondents. A range of issues was raised; not only those associated with grade calculations for those who had cancelled exams, but also those missing out on progression or transition support in the summer term. Several comments pointed to concerns that students who did not have a family background in higher education might be influenced against higher education progression, because of the negative attitudes of their families or because they were under pressure to support the family economically. If grade predictions are used as a basis for admission to courses, state-educated students will be adversely affected, because research has shown that only 16% of applicants achieve the A level grade points that they are predicted, with most being over-predicted. However, this overprediction is less pronounced for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, meaning that advantaged students are likely to benefit from an admissions system based on predicted grades (Wyness, 2016). Issues were also raised in relation to the higher education progression opportunities for some specific groups, notably students who aspire to enter medical education; lack of access to work experience opportunities may be exacerbated in the current climate.

Several respondents were optimistic that developments taking place now, out of necessity, may create new working models for the future. For example, one Widening Participation Officer commented that the current situation has opened new channels for communications with schools, and telephone conversations have taken on a more personal touch, which will perhaps benefit relationships going forward.

Support from policy-makers.
We asked respondents what type of support they would like to receive. In the free text, three respondents commented thus:
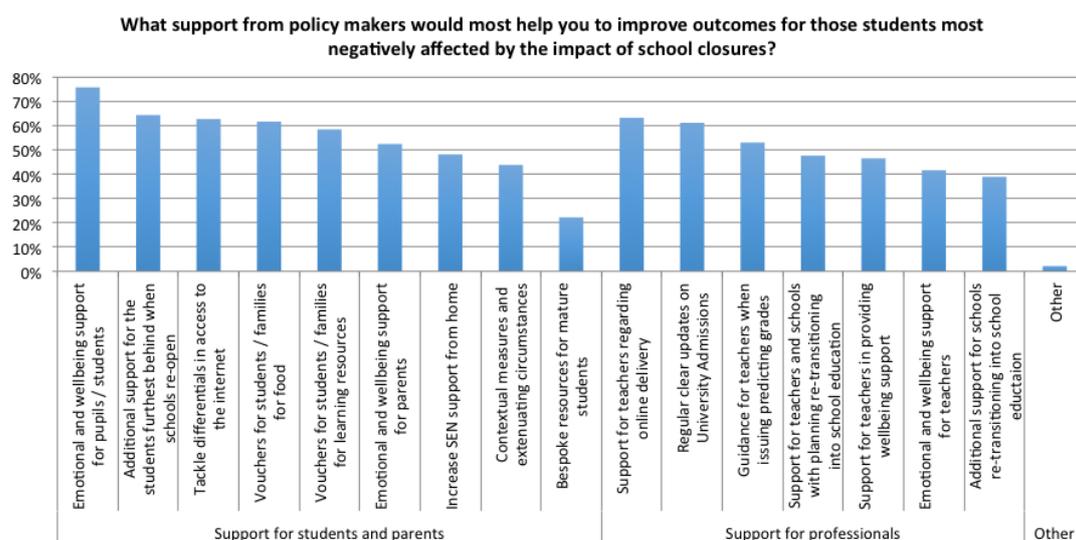
'I would like to see an offer of a national programme of online activities/events/webinars that students and parents can access during this time which can help to prepare for the next step.'

'Clear and concise messaging to pass to schools and students about HE progression and the UCAS process this summer.'

'The cancelling of A levels and the proposed use of constructed grades is causing a lot of concern and also raising questions about how they and other measures can be used for selection while still being fair and encouraging widening participation.'

The quantitative data indicated that respondents most wished to see support for wellbeing, and additional support for those falling behind. A majority would like to see support to tackle differentials; whether in relation to internet access, learning resources, or necessities. Just under half were in favour of prioritising increased SEN support at home, and support for teachers in relation to online delivery; and a large minority welcomed support for teachers re-transitioning students into education and providing emotional support.

Well over two-fifths thought changes should be made to contextual measures and extenuating circumstances in higher education admissions. Regular updates on university admissions, along with guidance on grade predictions, stand out as key measures many respondents would like to see, to support higher education transition at this time.

What support from policy makers would most help you to improve outcomes for those students most negatively affected by the impact of school closures?

Overall, it is clear that widening participation professionals are very concerned about the less advantaged students they serve and the impact of the pandemic on their experiences and future prospects. It is worth highlighting that these concerns are not always or even primarily about educational outcomes, but about the general safety and wellbeing of the students.

In terms of their own practice, there was obviously some uncertainty and anxiety around the rapid changes to delivery and working practices, and the cancellation of many widening participation events. However, there were also silver linings, with some aspects of practice being improved, and with the potential for long-term enhancements to practice after the re-opening of schools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TECHNICAL APPENDIX

As a result of the dissemination method, we cannot claim that our survey is representative of the respondent groups. Participants self-selected to participate, and many chose to participate as a result of being approached through our networks. This is different from a population random probability sample where there is confidence that the findings are broadly representative of the respondent groups.

We conducted a second survey with Uni Connect staff, as part of an OfS-commissioned project, and this survey was available from March 25th to April 14th 2020.

We note the following main skews in the data where our participants were different from the general population.

1. An over-representation of female respondents (e.g. 81% of the teachers and 92% of the parents/guardians were female).
2. An over-representation from the South-West (34% of teachers and 51% of parents responded from Exeter, Taunton, Torquay, Bath, Truro and Bristol).
3. An over-representation of highly educated parents, at 79%; postgraduate 37%, undergraduate 31%, other professional qualification 11%.
4. An over-representation of secondary-school teachers in the teacher survey.
5. An over-representation of Russell Group staff in the admissions and outreach staff survey (34%).
6. A geographic focus on England (e.g. 97% of admissions and outreach staff were from England).
7. The majority of student respondents were from year 13.

While we are not claiming that the findings are representative, they provide a snapshot into the experience of teachers and parents/guardians during the initial phase of the school closure. The survey with young people contained a range of open-ended questions, allowing us to capture a range of individual experiences of the impact, and feelings towards (e.g.) the cancellation of examinations. The survey of admissions and outreach staff allows for rapidly feeding through ideas for supporting transitions into higher education.

June 2020