

Master Richard Arens – Written Evidence (LBC0046)

In response to the Call for Evidence from the COVID-19 Committee: Life Beyond COVID

1. As a 17-year-old A Level student from Leicester (at Wyggeston and Queen Elizabeth College), my schooling has been greatly affected and there is much ambiguity about how teaching and exams will take place, if at all, next year. As a member of Leicester's Young People's Council, I think the full impact COVID has had on my city is still to be seen, particularly following the extended lockdown. Yet even so, I believe there are positives to be taken from this ongoing experience and that there is an opportunity for stronger communities.
2. The lack of a physical classroom has inevitably forced us students to become more resourceful. Instead of ploughing through paper to make notes or complete tasks, most of our schoolwork is being done and handed in online. Not only is this a clear benefit for the environment, it helps teachers mark more efficiently since all work is now in a more consistent format. The largest downside is the obvious absence of teachers. Relationships with teachers are an integral part of a child's support network and development, both academically and socially. Not all schools have delivered live lessons, nor provided regular check-ups on its pupils, leaving some behind. In future, these more efficient methods of how schoolwork is set and completed could be retained, but the traditional face-to-face connection between teachers and their students needs to be a prioritised at all levels of education.
3. Then there is the prospect of university, and even before the pandemic, the exact benefits of achieving a degree were obscure. For most A Level students, university still seems like the default route. The experience of university life and the networking opportunities it brings are both very attractive. However, the supposed decline of how valuable a degree really is suggests that some students ought to choose other pathways into a career. I believe one of the main reasons students still go onto university despite this is the possible lack of an alternative.
4. Naturally, gap years are considered but tend to be expensive for families, and perhaps slightly dangerous if spent abroad. Apprenticeships are on the rise, but for high achievers, they seem more directed at those skilled in STEM subjects, rather than the humanities or arts. My worry is that many, including myself, will go to university, but will struggle to find employment with a decent wage, or more importantly, a career with a clear progression route.
5. Young people increasingly feel as though they face an uphill battle against "the system". With the current crisis, it looks as though younger generations will be left to "pick up the bill", probably through higher taxation and stagnating wages, and this could be reflected in Britain's political balance. Already younger people have turned to more extreme political persuasions and I fear this pandemic will worsen sentiments against the moderate, reconciliatory, centre-ground. Having said that,

people hold more fervour and are less apathetic about societal issues, demonstrated most recently in the Black Lives Matter protests – a major positive.

6. On a more personal note, friendships have become harder to maintain. The regulations on how we interact make it difficult to freely enjoy another's company. Additionally, there is a limitation on culture more widely. Having once sung in Leicester Cathedral Choir, I know that worship has been severely altered by moving online. These changes of course include non-religious clubs and hobbies. On the other hand, many including myself have taken up free online courses and have delved into new interests, such as painting. The lockdown has held up a mirror to what we value. So, it is possible that we could become less centred on our occupations and in turn, experience a sort of cultural renaissance over the next few years.
7. Overall, my hope for the future is a reduction in inequality, including economically – not out of ideological reservations, but rather to deepen the sense of national community. The phrase "we're all in this together" rings hollow for young people without sufficient electronic resources or for those in more affected regions across the UK. Predictably, the generational and regional divides will go hand-in-hand with economic strain.
8. The atmosphere globally will, I think, appear starker, given the increased tensions between superpowers and the smaller nations caught up in the middle. I mention this because it will be to the detriment of environmental causes that depend so much on international cooperation, and for which most young people have such urgent support.
9. I think the crisis has accelerated and further exposed problems in Britain, but ultimately, this could prove to be a good thing for healing divisions and for societal self-improvement generally. Thank you for giving people the opportunity to provide evidence which might not be heard otherwise, and so I hope this proves helpful.

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