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Mental health and Quarantine for AS and A level students of 2021
Investigation and report by Instagram meme account @Alevel21meme

Context:

Abstract

A close ended survey created by Instagram account @alevel21meme to investigate the impact of academic pressure and lockdown towards Year 12 pupils of 2020- who are due to take their A Level or AS Level exams in 2021- on their mental health. A survey is shared on social media for a duration of 5 days, allowing student's voices to be heard.

Introduction

Lockdown has led to students having to teach themselves 4 months worth of A Level content. Not every student was able to access adequate resources required for students to continue their studies. Some of the many resources that were lacking in some pupils' studies include: support from teachers; mental health outlets; and equipment such as laptops and textbooks. This doesn't correlate to the functionalist term of "meritocracy" as not every student is given an equal opportunity through their education, but instead helps create a larger gap between social classes.

Motivation for this study occurred after Ofqual's statement. **"Generally we have proposed fewer changes for AS and A levels than we have for GCSEs. This is because AS and A level students are older, they are likely to be more motivated to study the narrower range of subjects of their choice and they should be better independent learners."** This statement has caused outrage amongst A Level students as some believe that is "Absurd to believe we are more motivated because of our age". As Ofqual had stated in their "Equality Impact Assessment", one of the questions asked is "Are there other potential equality impacts that we have not explored? What are they?". This report would explore one of the multiple topics that affect students: negative mental health.

Method

The method we had decided to use was a close ended survey. This was the most relevant method to collect a large sample and make the results more representative and quantifiable.

This survey was published online for a duration of 5 days with the help of the Instagram account @alevel21meme 's audience and other accounts with large followings.
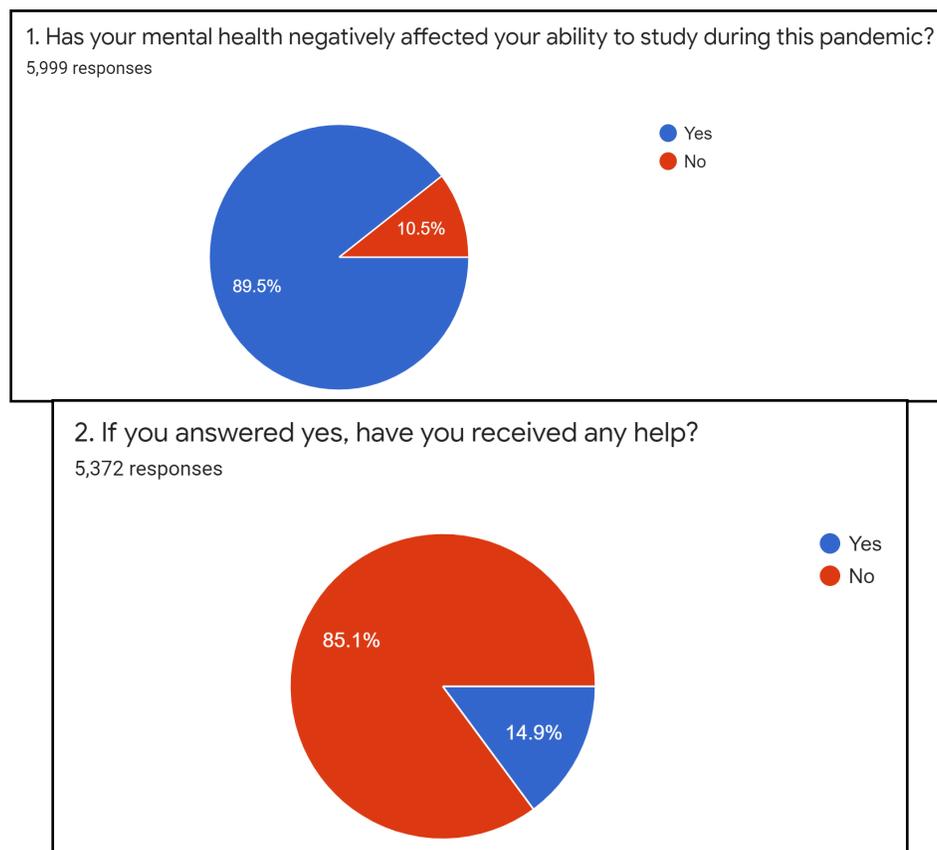
Our survey was targeted toward Year 12 students as the proposed changes directly affected these students. A few students fear that their opinions may be over spoken by people in authority and parents within the survey attached to the proposal. This is harmful towards the expectation of Year 12 students and not getting a diverse representation within social classes. The use of social media for the survey helps reach more students within all positions and allow them to acknowledge that others are worried about the same issue.

The use of a question based on suicide was an ethical issue and therefore didn't require respondents to answer the question. Leaving a trigger warning for the mention of suicide was also in the description of the survey which is often familar amongst young adults.

Analysis of results
Overall, the survey had received 5,999 responses across the duration of 5 days. This makes the results representative. However allowing the survey to be online for a few more days and getting more help from bigger accounts, the survey may have received more responses.

Negative Mental Health

1. Has your mental health negatively affected your ability to study during this pandemic?
5,999 responses

Yes
No

10.5%
89.5%

2. If you answered yes, have you received any help?
5,372 responses

Yes
No

85.1%
14.9%

The first few   questions
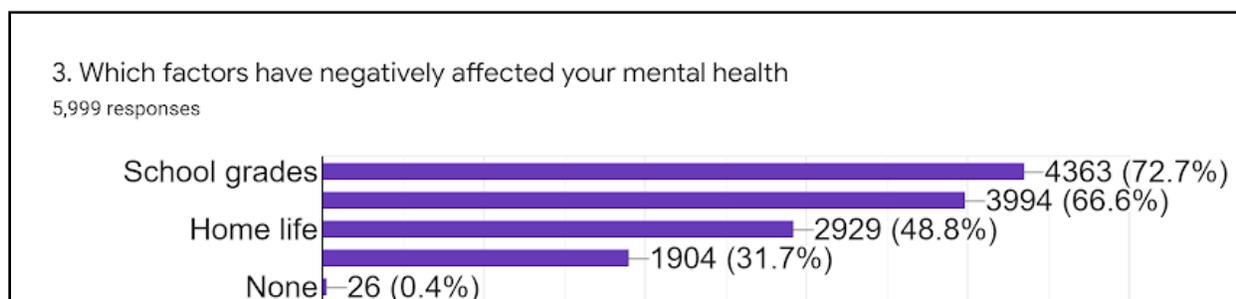
were based on whether the respondent had experienced negative mental health during this pandemic which may affect their students. Not everyone has the same experiences with mental health but they are often not deemed to be severe when spoken about. As a nation we need to acknowledge that younger people are more likely to be affected by mental health issues and must try to help these students. With 89.5% students being affected by negative mental health issues, it raises the question of how many students have been suffering for the past few months across the country, due to the extra stress of lockdown.

A study taken on by University College London, Imperial College and the University of Sussex suggests young people are more likely to be at risk of mental health issues due to lockdown.[1] As half of the respondents with no previous mental health issues were showing high levels of depressive symptoms and moderate to severe levels of anxiety. Another study suggests that 80% of young adults and teenagers believe that their mental health has worsened due to the pandemic.[1]

Acknowledging that mental health is a difficult issue to talk about brings the question of how the government is going to help support students with mental health issues. A study completed by YoungMinds indicated that 31% of those with previous mental health issues have had no access to help despite still needing it.[2] In our study, 85.1% have not received any help for their mental health as this raises a question on how the government is going to help these young adults.

Factors of Negative Mental Health
There are often multiple different factors that accompany negative mental health.

3. Which factors have negatively affected your mental health
5,999 responses

School grades — 4363 (72.7%)
— 3994 (66.6%)
Home life — 2929 (48.8%)
— 1904 (31.7%)
None — 26 (0.4%)

The main 4 options we had given were (in the order of question number 3 results): school grades, anxiety of the coronavirus, home life and relationships. Allowing this question to be a check box question allows us to recognise that one factor does not represent the cause of mental health issues. The idea that 72.2% of students are worried about their school grades clearly represents how most students are worried about our grades. With the lack of motivation, support and confirmation during lockdown; students are unsure that they would get the grades necessary for our future. One of the main factors to focus on would be the 48.8% that are

[1]https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/12/young-people-overeating-as-they-battle-lockdown-anxiety-says-uk-study
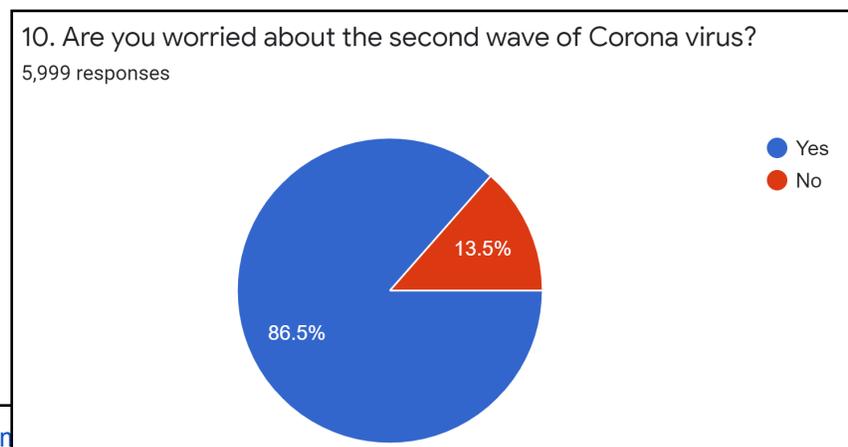[2]https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/

struggling with their home situation. Some students used school as a safe space and quarantine had taken away their safety, with some situations, such as verbal abuse, perhaps not clearly visible, but could have a psychological toll on the person. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs[3], humans cannot self-actualise and reach their full potential unless their lower needs are fulfilled, and for many students right now, they aren't. This makes it difficult for students to study effectively, as many of their basic needs of safety haven't been fulfilled.

4.Has the academic pressure made you suicidal?
5,862 responses

- Yes
- No

72.1%
27.9%
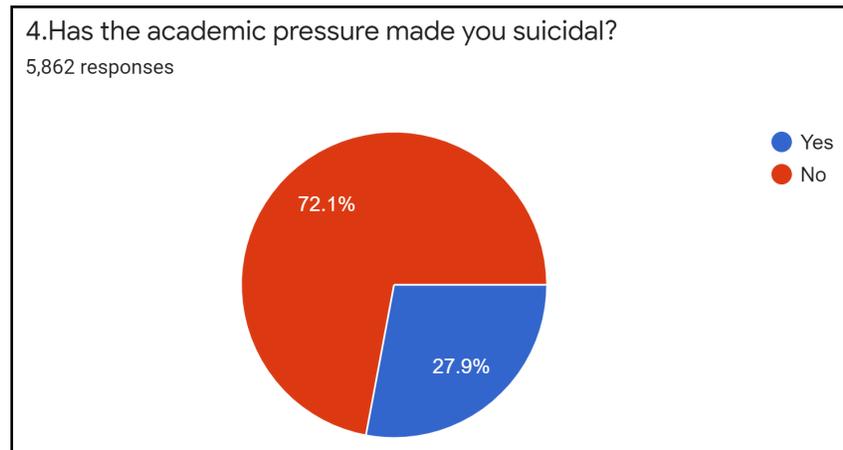
This question was not made compulsory to answer however most of our respondents have replied to this question. As mentioned in our methods, the survey contained a trigger warning/ content warning at the beginning of the survey. The anonymity of this survey allowed some respondents to be open about their experiences but with 27.9% of students experiencing suicidal tendencies could be seen as alarming. A large misconception of Generation Z is that these young adults would often experience negative thoughts and not reciprocate the actions. From a 2019's Official for National Statistics , there has been a sufficient increase by 27% in male suicides between the ages of 10 and 24 since 2017 as well as the female rate increasing by 83%.[4]

The suicide rate has been increasing drastically amongst young adults, would quarantine be a mental health emergency?

10. Are you worried about the second wave of Corona virus?
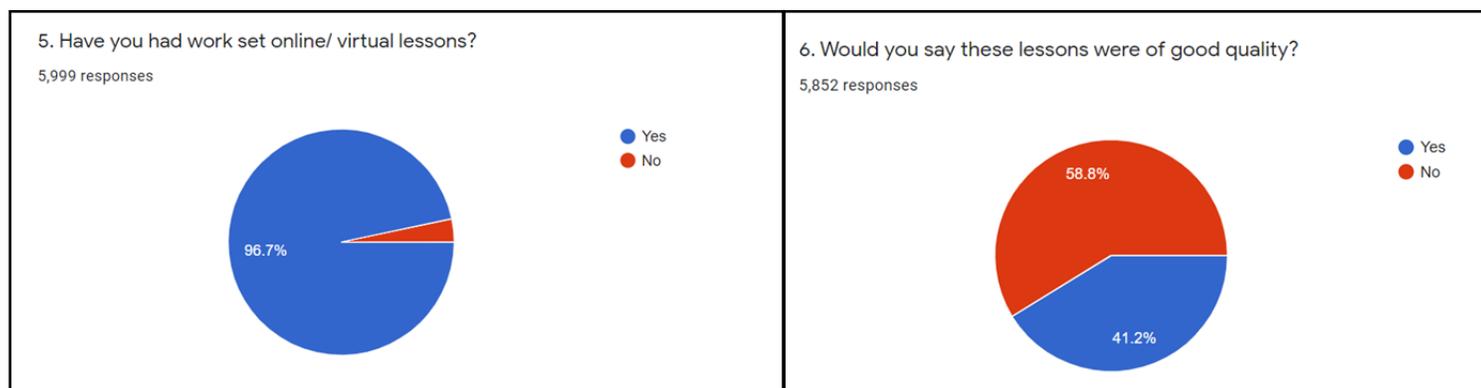5,999 responses

- Yes
- No

13.5%
86.5%

[3] https://www.sin
[4] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2018registrations

The second wave of Coronavirus is predicted to hit during winter which would lead to major disruption within our education with no sufficient evidence to prove a students predicted grades. To support this opinion, some students believe that the government's actions towards the coronavirus were not as strict as they could've been. With 86.5% being worried about the second wave may reflect the anxiety of some students and how their anxiety is affecting their academic career.
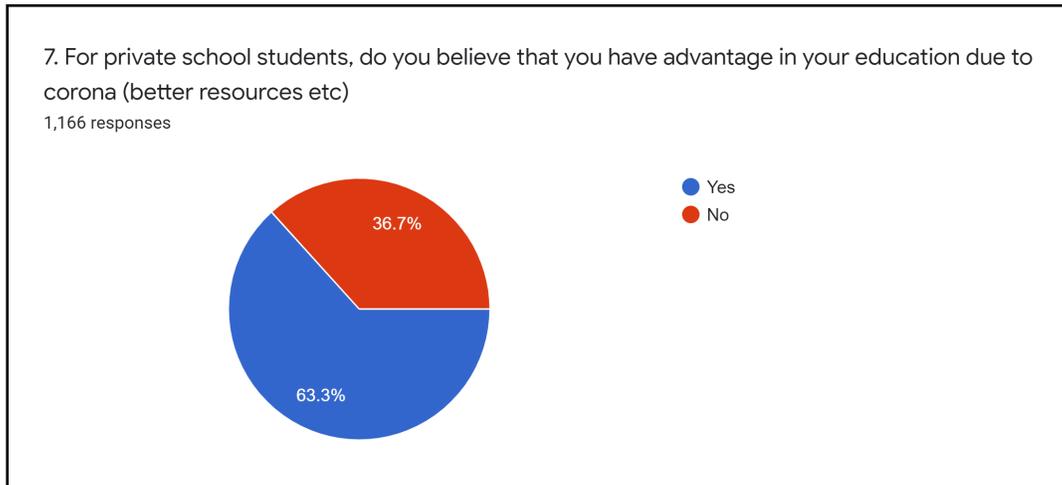
Quality of Online Lessons

Although 96.7% of respondents answered that they had been receiving online lessons since the start of lockdown (this also begs the question of the experience of the other 3.3%, and how their learning has been affected), only 41.2% answered that these lessons were of "good" quality. This highlights the disparities between students of different schools, who have been experiencing completely different methods and types of online teaching. This can and will have a detrimental effect on students' grades in their upcoming exams, as whilst some students have had fairly positive experiences with online learning, most others have had the opposite. Even the webpage provided by the government in order to aid home learning only provides resources for core subjects, completely disregarding most struggling A Level students.[5]
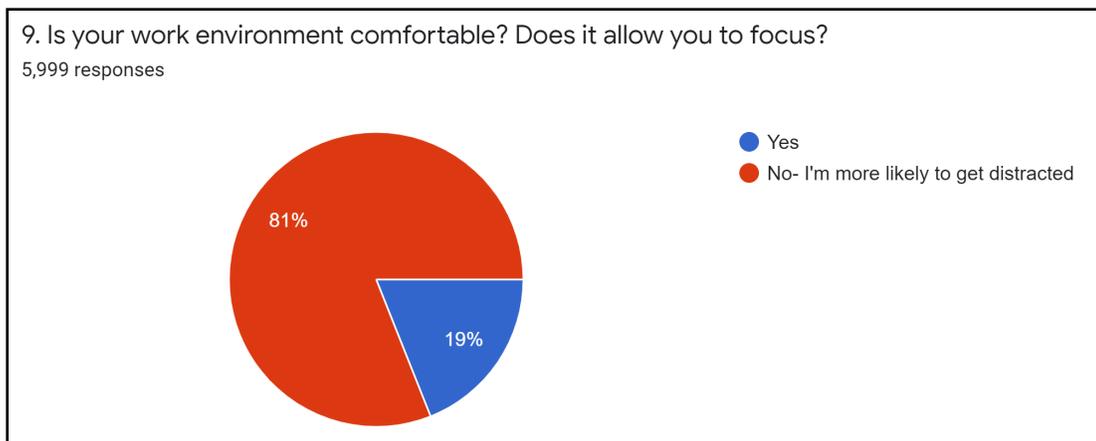

Class disparities are also clear from these results, with 63.3% of 1166 responses from private school students acknowledging that they believe themselves to have had an advantage over other students in their education during lockdown. This may be due to better access to equipment- such as laptops or textbooks- or due to receiving better quality teaching and online lessons. This reflects clearly the disparities between classes due to lockdown, and the unfair effects it has had on students, which will likely be reflected in the results of the 2021 exams. Expecting students to complete A Levels as normal with full content would not be accommodating these disadvantaged students, by not acknowledging the amount of learning lost. It is important to remember the way in which A Levels are normally taught, as while there

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[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-online-education-resources
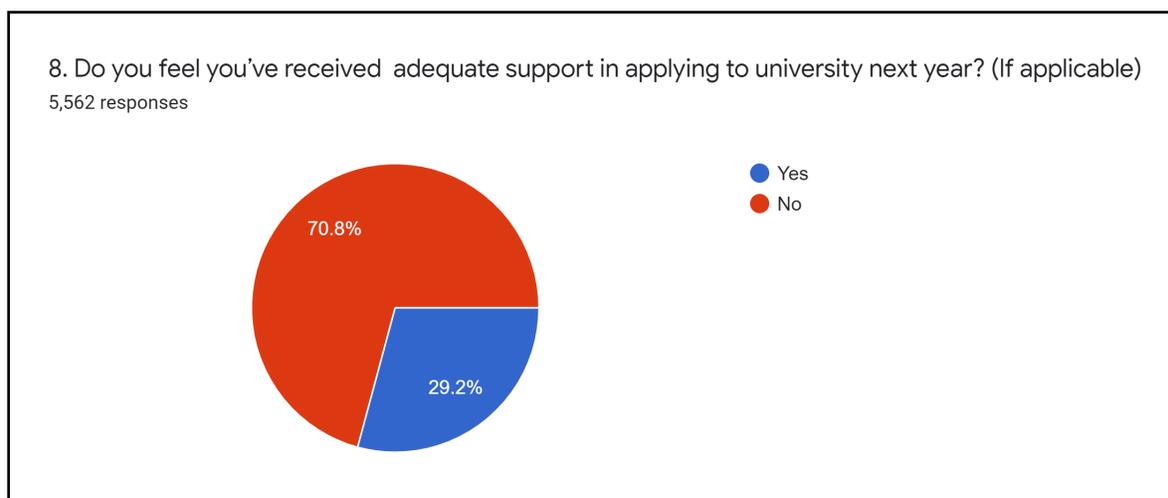
is, of course, a focus on independent study, a classroom setting is still an imperative part of the A Level. Leading students to reproduce class inequality within another generation.

7. For private school students, do you believe that you have advantage in your education due to corona (better resources etc)

1,166 responses

As well as this, many students find their home environment difficult to focus and concentrate in, even if they are receiving adequate help and support from their schools. This is seen as 81% of respondents answered that their work environment was not "comfortable" and does not allow them to focus. This means that even the students receiving the best possible online lessons and distance learning may also be disadvantaged and find themselves unable to complete satisfactory work in the way they may have been able to in a school environment. For these students, their work environment is a factor they cannot change, as they are unable to visit a public library, for example, as they may have been able to do before lockdown. This puts these students at a huge disadvantage, especially as many students' home lives have been directly affected and worsened by COVID-19, with many people losing family members or dealing with family illness, making it even harder to focus on work and school.

9. Is your work environment comfortable? Does it allow you to focus?
5,999 responses

Legend:
- Yes
- No- I'm more likely to get distracted

81%
19%

In addition to this, many Year 12 students are also currently beginning the process of applying to university, attending online open days and starting personal statements. This is already a very stressful process, but with lockdown measures in place this has only heightened the stress, with students unable to visit their prospective universities, and many not receiving adequate support from their school with their application, that they may have received had they been in school. This is reflected within this survey, with only 29.2% of 5562 respondents believing themselves to have had adequate support with their university applications. This puts other students at a major disadvantage that they likely would not have had under different circumstances, and only increases the pressure on students to perform well and get outstanding exam results, something made all the more difficult due to the major loss of learning.

8. Do you feel you've received adequate support in applying to university next year? (If applicable)
5,562 responses

Legend:
- Yes
- No

70.8%
29.2%

Positive Mental Health

When considering the effects of lockdown and quarantine we have to also consider the positive outcomes.

5. Have you experienced positive mental health during this quarantine?
5,999 responses

● Yes
● No

49.5%

50.5%
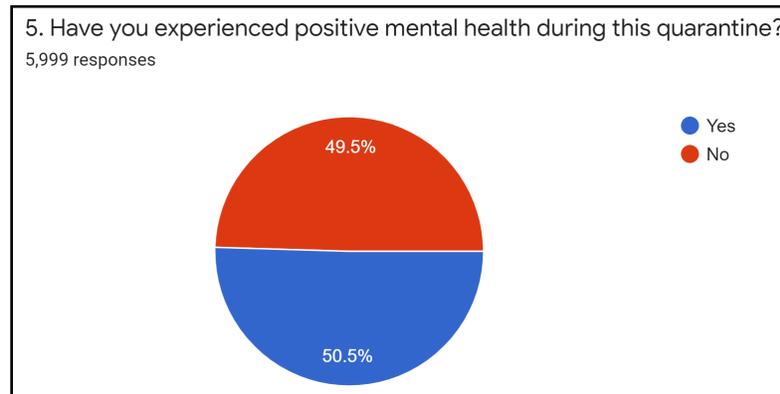
50.5% of our respondents had experienced positive mental health which highlights how quarantine has had some positive experiences from this lockdown. However the method in which this question was conducted was unclear. This question could be misinterpreted into the respondent just thinking about one event that may have been positive. Instead, this question's focus should have been on whether our respondent had an overall positive experience with their mental health during this quarantine. However research from YoungMinds found that 11% of young adult's mental health have improved due to being able to avoid bullying and the academic pressure. [2]

Conclusion

With internal factors, such as the academic pressure to do well in an uncertain future, and the external factors such as a student's home life, the negative effects lockdown has had on students and young people are abundant. One of the potential factors impacted by inequalities within education for the current Year 12s is negative mental health. Ignoring psychological factors will put a lot of students at risk and this is becoming more of a relevant problem for everyone within society.

This research is not only relevant to A level and AS level students taking exams in 2021, as other research directed towards a similar age group has created similar and alarming statistics proving that lockdown has affected a wide range of students. These effects cannot be ignored, and something must be done to accommodate these students, as the unusual circumstances faced this year will surely have an effect on exams. Although A Level students are slightly older, this does not make them immune to the effects of lockdown and the negative consequences it has had on their mental health. Independent learning is only a part of the A Level, and students should not be expected to rely on their independent learning skills to teach themselves the courses and pass the exams, and it must be remembered the importance of real teaching and learning for many students.

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