



THE IMPACT OF THE
CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

ON STUDENTS PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY IN 2020

ROBERT PERRY & LOUISE SHAW



**PICKLEJAR
COMMUNICATIONS**



INTRODUCTION

The closure of schools in March 2020 led to an immediate impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of students across the UK. One group of students in particular were at a turning point in their lives - they were about to sit their final exams, about to take the next step in their education, about to move to new towns or cities... this was possibly the most important time in their lives so far, and the COVID-19 pandemic threw everything into disarray.

Things continued to change in quick succession: students would learn online... but then exams were cancelled. Grades are to be determined by teachers, and results will be sent out in July... or maybe not. Throughout this, students were trying to stay motivated, to keep themselves informed, and to continue to make their decisions about the future.

We wanted to find out how students were reacting to this disruption. At Pickle Jar Communications we believe our strengths lie in uncovering the stories of the real people beneath our research. We spend a lot of time talking to students and prospective students about their motivations, their experiences, about how they make potentially life-changing decisions, and how their education fits into their wider lives. We wanted to bring this empathetic approach to the current situation, to provide an insight into how students were coping with their new normal.

We've delved into what the pandemic has done to students' daily lives, to their immediate plans, to their long-term goals. We've given them a chance to express their concerns about the grading process and to share their grief for the opportunities they have now lost.

But it's not just about giving the students a sympathetic ear - what we've uncovered is a valuable resource for those in education communications. We know that universities have been swiftly adapting to the pandemic, and some of the suggestions we've made in this report may well already be in motion. But there may also have been limited time to address the concerns of specific students - so if this research can aid universities in supporting students in any way, we'll be glad to have been able to help.



Tracey Playle

CEO, Pickle Jar Communications



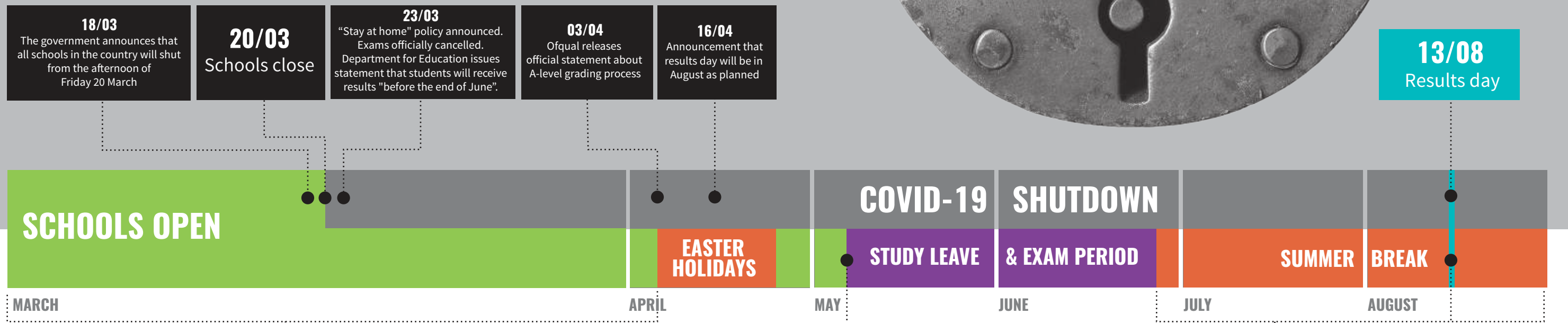
TIMELINES

The timeline below shows how students' lives have been disrupted by the coronavirus outbreak. Up until the middle of March 2020, they had been anticipating that their academic year would play out as it has for others in the past, as indicated in the "Expectation" timeline. Although the exact dates would differ for everyone, they were likely to hit the same kind of milestones - their final term at school, perhaps a period of study leave, followed by exams and a long holiday. At the end of that long summer break they'd receive their A-level results, which - for many - would determine their next steps.

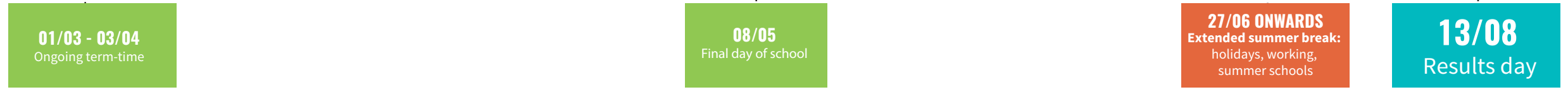
What happened instead can be seen in the difference between the two timelines. March was disrupted by the closure of schools and a flurry of announcements about exams, grading, and when they would receive their results. Then, in April, they found out that their results would be issued on the same day as was planned before the pandemic - August 13th - leaving them feeling as though they had been abandoned by those in authority. Now, with a 4-month wait until they would have any certainty about their future, they were anxiously waiting to hear from anyone to help them plan for September. As we'll see later, this information gap was filled with varying degrees of success.



REALITY



EXPECTATION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We identified 8 mindsets into which students fall.

These mindsets describe their motivations for attending university and, consequently, how their reaction to the pandemic has affected their plans for the future.

Students' self-reported reactions to the change in their life **have mostly been negative**. They're feeling stressed, anxious, and worried, resulting in a drop in motivation.

One of the biggest causes of students' emotional state is the feeling that they are **missing out on opportunities that other year groups have taken for granted**. This covers the personal and social - the long summer break, their leavers' ball or prom, not being in school for their final day - and the academic - the cathartic experience of sitting exams or the chance to give their studies a final push for a better grade.

Although they report their own emotional reaction as stress and anxiety, **most students feel that they are coping better than their friends**. This seems to be due to a kind of echo chamber of emotion being created by the enforced digital communications of lockdown, which makes an individual student think that others are perhaps more stressed than they really are.

Parents and other family members have become even more of an influence on students' decisions than they normally would be, again due to the enforced proximity of lockdown. Students are also forging connections with supportive teachers at their schools, who are helping them find ways to stay motivated.

Students are very concerned about their grades and the process by which they'll be assessed, while also accepting that there isn't really a better option. Some are worried that their performance so far does not reflect what they might have got in an exam. Others worry that their grades will be looked at through the lens of COVID-19 for the rest of their lives, having an impact on whether they'll be able to achieve their career goals.

There is a lot of **anger and confusion around the decision to release A-level results on the 13th of August** as originally planned. Students believe that their results will be known long before this, and would have liked the extra time so that they can make a decision in full knowledge of their grades.

Students do not feel that they are being provided with information that addresses their concerns. They acknowledge that there is uncertainty in many areas of life, but they would still like clarity around grades, university admissions, and plans for September.

Many students are feeling **abandoned or ignored by the universities they have applied to**. They feel that the communications they receive - if they receive any at all - do not address their circumstances, or make no mention of the pandemic at all.

Students cite **communications that involve real people as those that are most effective** at making them feel supported. This includes email communication with university staff, online discussions with other students, and even live Q&As with senior university representatives.

Most students are still planning to attend university.

They want to achieve their career goals, and they want to go through the rite of passage that university allows. They're still keen to study in September, but they do have a lot of concerns about online learning or not being able to socialise in the way they would like.

The possibility of a socially-distanced campus, or an online start in September, is not popular among those who want the entire university experience. They want the experience they were expecting, and that others have had, and are willing to defer or change university to increase the chance they can have a "real" student lifestyle.

Some students believe that the fees they pay for university are supposed to incorporate the entire experience, so **would not be happy to receive what they believe to be a "lower" level of service for the same cost**.

METHODOLOGY

Because the primary aim of this work was to uncover the personal reactions, emotional responses, motivations, and future plans of A-level students, we adopted a qualitative approach to our research.

The primary source for our findings was a series of telephone interviews, supported by data from online surveys and social listening. We conducted 30-minute interviews with 26 A-level students from locations across the UK, with representatives from state schools, grammar schools, sixth form colleges and independent schools. In our supporting survey we gathered responses from 326 students across the UK, again representing the spectrum of school types.

Interviews followed a semi-structured set of questions, with the same questions for all interviewees. The questions addressed students' response to the COVID-19 outbreak, their thoughts about how their exam results and grades would be affected, what their future plans were, and what changes they might now be considering.

Fieldwork was carried out in April / May 2020.

We found that the commonalities between students were most often seen in their motivations, their mindsets, rather than their backgrounds or demographics.

We have identified eight mindsets into which students are likely to fall. These mindsets indicate how they are likely to be feeling about the effects of the pandemic, and in turn what their plans are for continuing their education.

THE 8 STUDENT MINDSETS



FOR THE JOB PROSPECTS

Students with this mindset are attending university to ultimately get a job - usually a specific career or vocation. This group is likely to be concerned about the altered grading process that might decide their future, and may have a desire to retake exams if the opportunity is available. They will be seeking information about the application and acceptance process from the universities they are considering, and they tend to rely on their parents for advice and support. They are unlikely to want to defer or delay their education, but they have doubts about the efficacy of online teaching.



FOR THE UNI EXPERIENCE

This group of students are planning to attend university for the student experience. They want to get a good education, and to progress to a graduate career later in life, but their immediate concern is enjoying their time as a student. They are concerned that attending in September 2020 will not live up to their expectations, and as such are willing to defer to improve their chances of getting the "true" university experience. They are already disappointed that their final year of school or college has been disrupted and that they have missed out on the rites of passage that every other year group has experienced.



FOR THE LONG HAUL

Those who plan to go to university for a degree that will take a longer-than-usual length of time form a distinct group of their own. They are committing to more than the three years that other students are considering, and the prospect of delaying this for a year is not popular. They feel that they are investing - and have invested - a lot of time in their education, and are likely to be trying to contact their university for information on how to confirm their place is secure. In turn, this group is most likely to say that they have received supportive information from the universities they have applied to.



FOR THE EDUCATION

This mindset is invested in the idea of education for its own sake. Although they are concerned about their grades, they are also likely to have a good relationship with their teachers, and feel more confident that they will achieve grades that reflect their potential. They will be communicating with their school and teachers about how to maintain their studies over the long summer break, even if this work doesn't count towards their final result. These students are keen to make the most of the education opportunities available at university, and they worry that online learning will not give them these opportunities.





FOR THE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Some students are considering studying apprenticeships (degree-level or otherwise) or subjects they think will involve active, hands-on learning. These students feel that they thrive in environments where they learn with others, in a physical interactive space. They tend to place high importance on the facilities a university can provide, so the prospect of online or socially-distanced learning in September 2020 is not appealing to them.



FOR THE RANKINGS AND REPUTATION

This group of students place a premium on the “prestige” of attending a highly ranked university. They are keen to ensure this happens for them, seeing it as important for their future. They are likely to defer if they don’t get the grades they want, rather than choosing what they see as a fallback option. These students have relied on their parents for advice during their university decision-making process, and this has become more pronounced during lockdown. They are likely to be concerned about the grading process, and to express that they feel their schools could be more supportive towards them. More so than any other group, they are keen to see that the universities they are considering are taking measures to look after students during the pandemic.



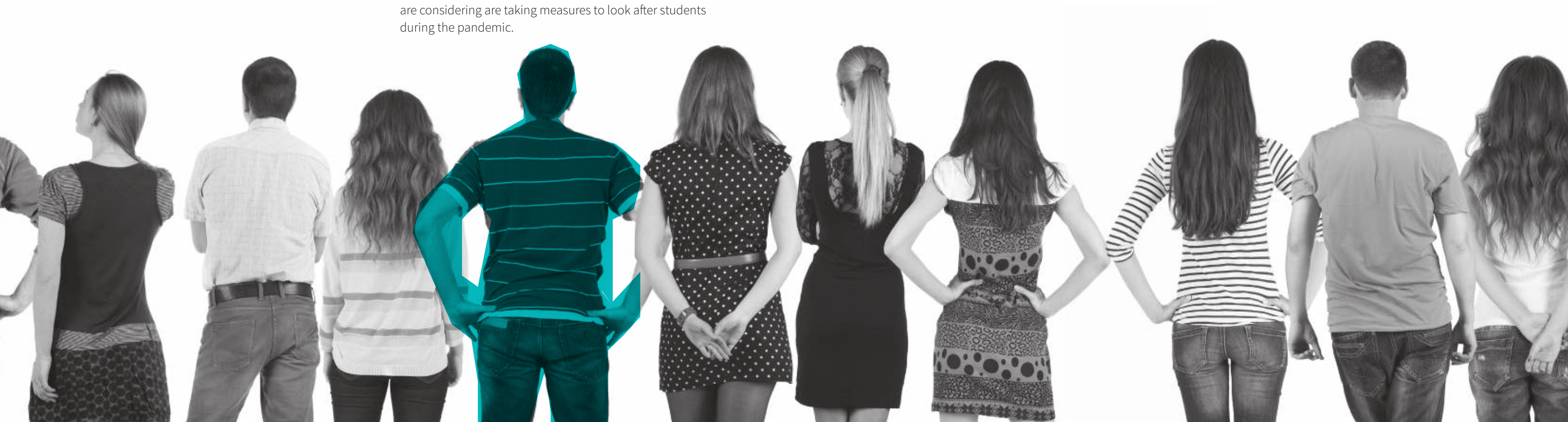
FOR CLOSENESS TO HOME

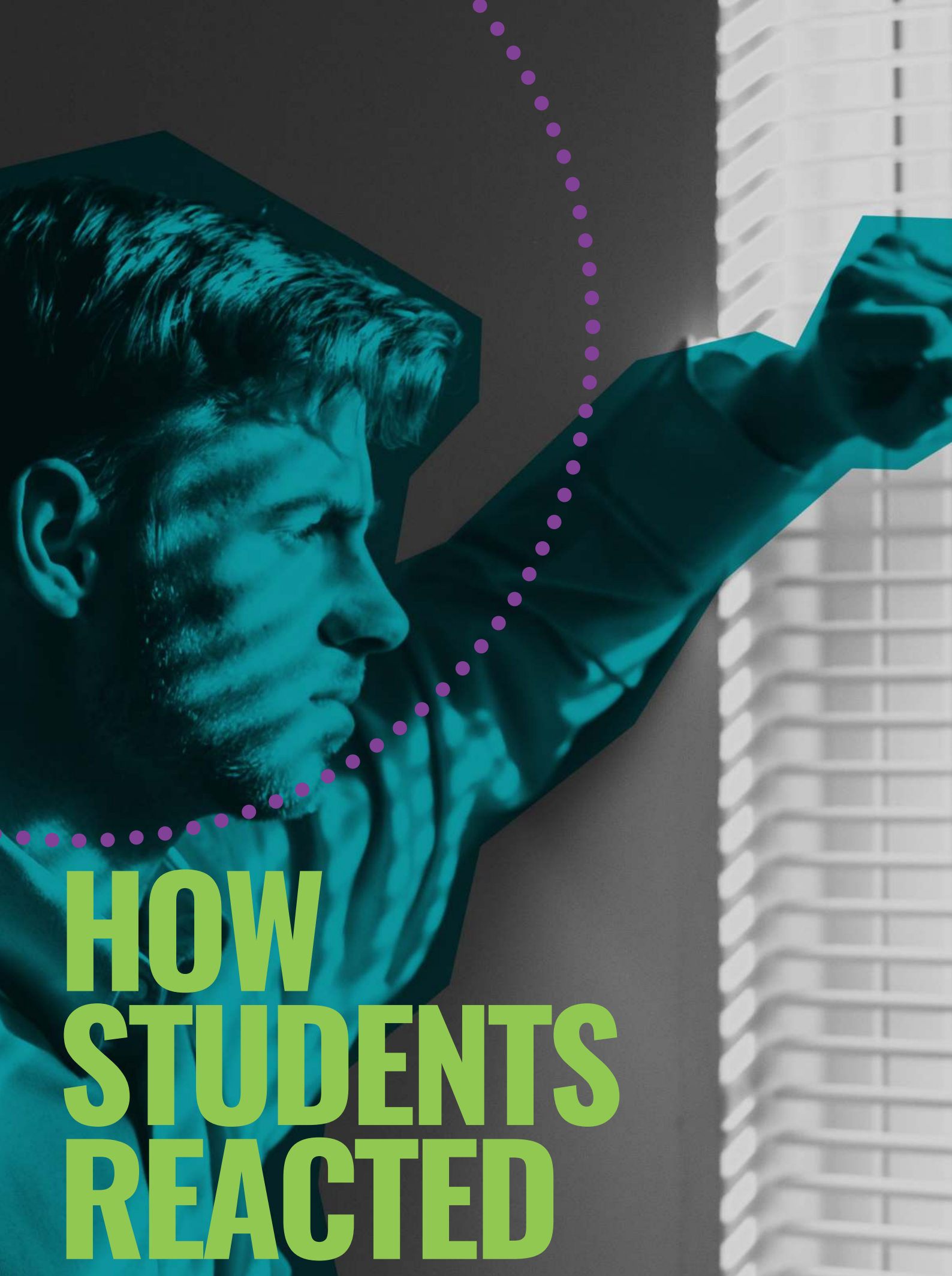
These students plan to attend a university that is close to family. They typically have a group of universities they are considering within a small geographical area, but with similar characteristics - such as all Russell Group, or strong in vocational courses. They are likely to be planning to live at home, and see the prospect of learning online as acceptable in the circumstances. This group tends to be confident that they will receive the grades they need for their preferred courses - or, in some cases, will have a pre-existing unconditional offer.



AS A BACKUP

The final group of students are those for whom university is already their fallback plan, or simply something they’re doing because they have no other options. These students are less likely to be driven by a desire to study a particular subject or to pursue a particular career, expecting that their passion will emerge later in life. They will be more likely than those in other mindsets to have received - and accepted - an unconditional offer, seeing this as a way to ensure they know what their next steps in life are. Because they feel like they know what will happen to them next, they are probably the most placid group we have identified.





HOW STUDENTS REACTED

When the pandemic took hold in the UK and social distancing measures were implemented, the initial reaction of many students was to focus on what they'd lost. They were no longer at school, no longer studying. They would not be sitting exams, celebrating their leaving day, or saying goodbye to friends they'd known for potentially their whole lives. They felt that things had just stopped, that opportunities of all kinds had been ripped away from them.

“ I have been unable to show the success of my revision and knowledge learnt over the past two years through my final A-Level examinations. **This has all felt pointless.**”

At the same time, other changes were being thrust on them - they were forced to stay at home and to learn remotely. Many described this change as “hard” or “difficult”, and talk of a slowing down - or a total stop - in their ability or desire to work.

“ I have lost a lot of motivation to do work or bring myself to do it due to the environment I am in. I have now missed out on studying the rest of my A-level content as even though the college are providing me with work to do, the circumstances I am in are not allowing me to do so.”

“ I haven't been concentrating on the studies of my subjects much, and my timetable for revision hasn't been used since the lockdown.”

“ Exams have been cancelled and although work has been set for us despite the cancellations, I am struggling to do the work as I now lack motivation.”

A small number have taken positively to the changes in their lives, with their new online lessons suiting their personal circumstances and preferences.

“ My motivation has surprisingly increased, but I think it's because I know that should I choose to resit - I most likely will with at least one subject - I have much more time to revise without the stress of seeing my peers constantly worrying as well. **At home I can take my time and not compare myself to others, which is making my revision much more enjoyable.**”

Others are reconsidering their options in light of what they have now experienced.

“ It's brought a lot more uncertainty in terms of the grades achieved, and lent an air of pointlessness to all of our work up to this point. It's also made the idea of a gap year far less appealing.”

EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

We asked students what words they would use to describe how they were feeling about how their studies - and plans for the future - had been affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. The most common emotions they described were anxiety, worry and sadness. These tended to be linked to the sudden change in their expectations of their future - they are anxious about their grades and A-level results, worried about what it means for their prospects, and sad that they have lost the opportunity to complete their final year of schooling in the way they planned.

A small number of students expressed more positive emotions such as happiness or relief. These students tended to be those who felt that they would achieve higher grades by not having to sit exams, or those who had unconditional offers from universities - a situation in which they see their exams as a formality rather than a necessity.

CONFUSED ANGRY
SAD RELIEVED FRUSTRATED
UNCERTAIN STRESSED
ANXIOUS HAPPY
NERVOUS WORRIED
BORED ANNOYED SCARED
UPSET

“WE’RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT”

Students were quick to point out that they understand that this is - as the phrase goes - an unprecedented situation. This is something that they and everyone else has had to adapt to in a short space of time, and they acknowledge the difficulties that this brings for schools, universities, the government and others.

“The whole university system got thrown into shock.”

They are also aware that they are not going through this alone. Knowing that their friends are going through the same thing gives them a feeling of solidarity and emotional connection, regardless of social distancing measures and advice to stay at home. This is a great source of support for them, but there are times when remote contact fuels the feeling of uncertainty.

“Everyone is in the same boat, so there’s no point worrying.”

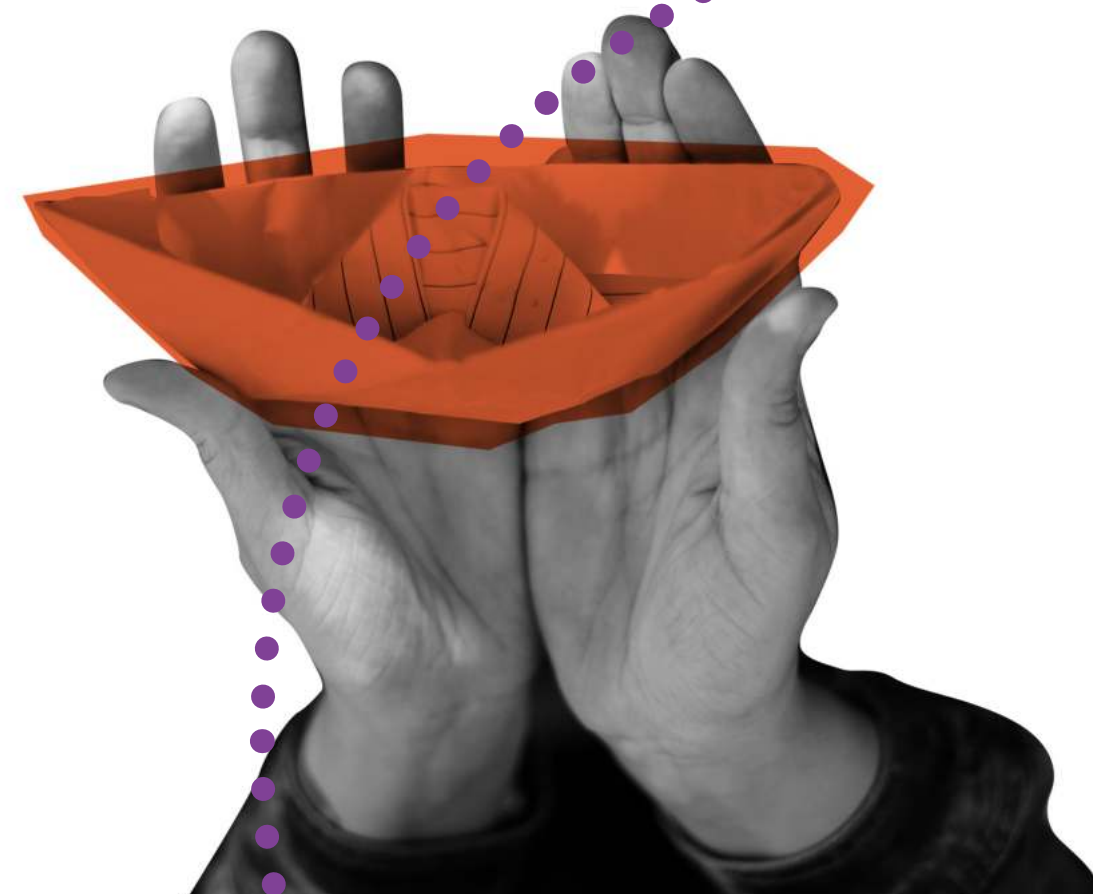
“Even though only some of my friends can achieve high grades due to the ranking system, there is no ill feeling towards each other. [The ill feeling] is more about the situation itself.”

“I talk to parents, teachers, my friends - everyone’s confused and nobody is certain about anything.”

While this is a positive response from these students, we need to sound a note of caution about how far this tolerance will go - there were comments from those we spoke to that suggested they expect institutions - schools, universities, UCAS, etc - to adapt in time and provide them with the support and services they need.

“I wouldn’t be happy with online teaching. It ruins the university experience, you can’t make friends as easily in the first week.”

“I’d still go to university if teaching moved online. It’s like school is at the moment - it’s just a temporary measure and it’ll be over soon.”



MISSED POTENTIAL

Another common thread is that students feel that opportunities have been taken away from them - the experience of their final few months at school, their exams, and, most importantly, the chance to prove themselves in the same way as other cohorts have.

“It feels very unfair. It’s no-one’s fault, but it feels like we’ve been stripped of our ability to show what we can do.”

“It was so quick. Wednesday Boris says schools shut, by Friday exams cancelled and people are saying goodbye and crying.”

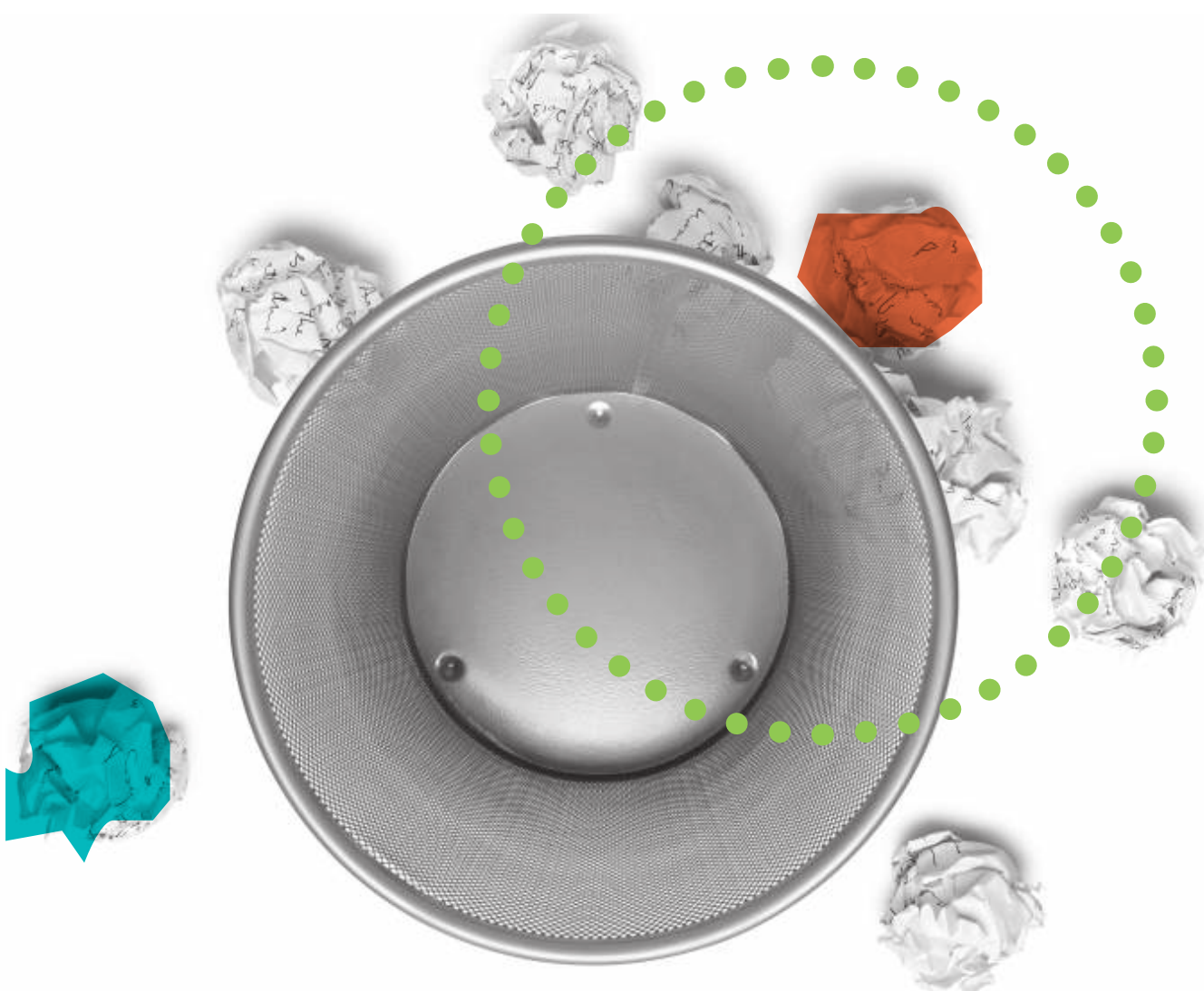
“Huge anti-climax after two years of hard work.”

“I’m not in control of it any more... it’s not in my hands. I can’t work for the results that I will get now.”

One of the opportunities that has been taken away is the chance to make an informed decision about university. While many students had pretty much made their choice by now, some were still expecting to go to open days or visit their potential new home. They now have to choose a place to live, work and study without all the information they would normally base this on.

“I would have visited an open day or researched more into accommodation before making a decision - but I was encouraged to decide quickly by my school.”

“I’ve decided against [university]. I hadn’t visited, so I have no idea what it’s like.”



CALMER THAN THEY THINK?

Although students say they are all in this together, there’s a shared perception throughout their comments on the situation that their friends are coping worse than they themselves are. We heard a lot of variations on “I seem to be calmer than my friends” or “they’re more stressed out than I am”.

“Everyone’s very stressed out. They’re more stressed out than me.”

“A lot of people didn’t really focus on the mocks, so now they’re panicking.”

“My friends are upset and anxious, some are panicking, some cry every day, but we’re all supporting each other.”

“We’ve got school and class group chats. Everyone goes on forums and then shares whatever they find. Sometimes it gets really panicked.”

Some students will, for all kinds of reasons, be experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety about their situations, but it’s also possible that the lack of personal contact and reliance on remote interactions is creating an unrealistic impression of how others are feeling. If everyone in a group reports that they’re coping better than the others, someone’s perception is surely inaccurate.

We see this a lot in their online interactions. When they talk to others on forums or social media (and presumably in their private messaging groups) they focus on the negatives, they complain, they vent - so they’re unintentionally conveying a level of anxiety or panic that isn’t entirely accurate.

“My teachers are making me very stressed out about the possibilities... all of them hate me and some don’t even show up to lessons.”

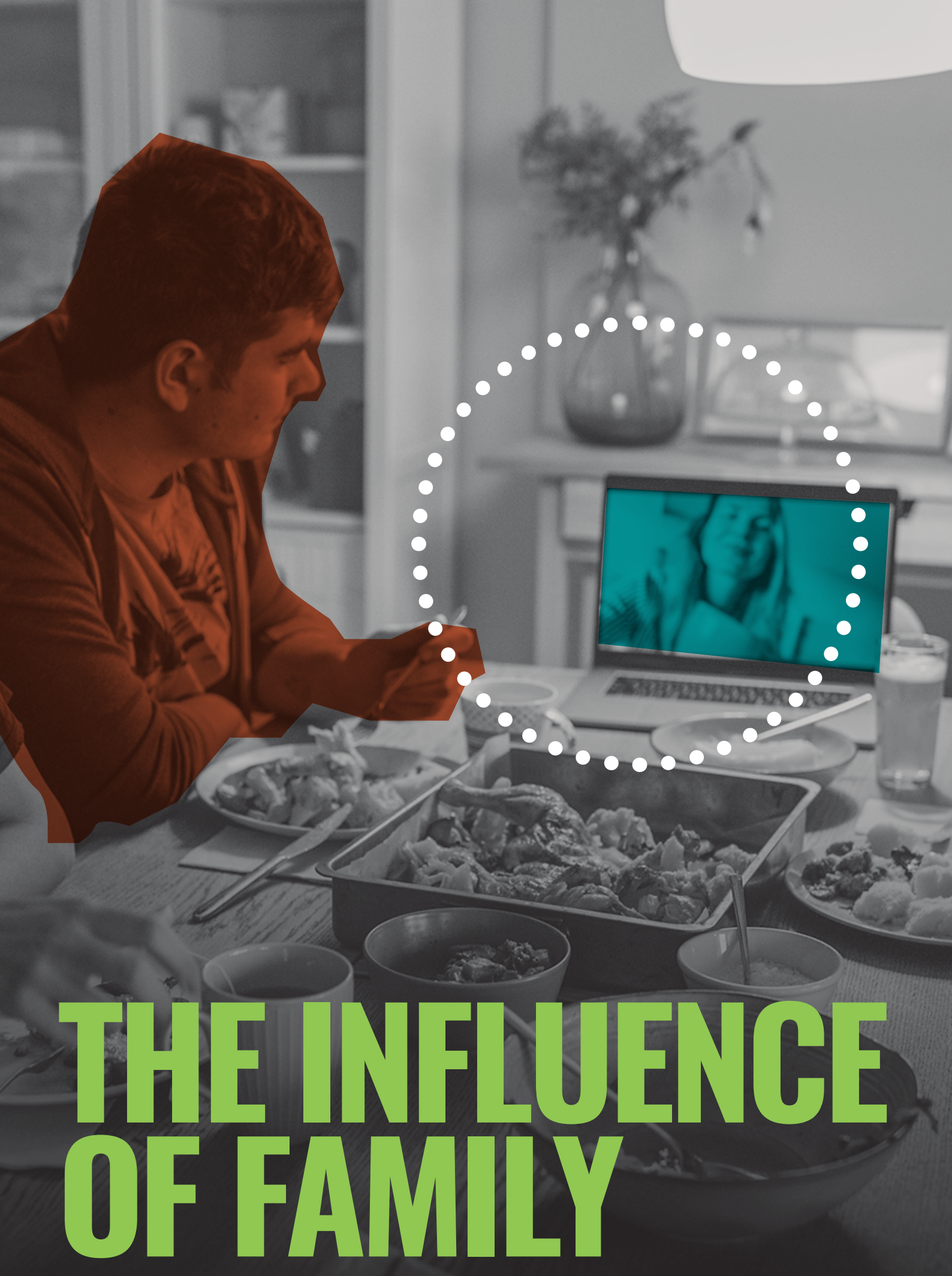
“Now I’m just sitting here feeling like an absolute clown with the knowledge that the work I did is pointless and that all grades will be awarded automatically. Feels bad.”

They’re still stressed - that’s what they report about their own feelings - but maybe not as much as others might perceive them to be.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

- ✓ **Provide suggestions**
Students are feeling adrift and aimless, but many are keen to fill their time with something productive. If you’re communicating with students, try to provide them with suggestions for how to continue working, perhaps in a way that bridges the time between now and when they start their official studies.
- ✓ **Demonstrate crisis leadership**
They want to know what is being done to combat the pandemic both nationally and globally, so universities have an opportunity to demonstrate their research efforts, community outreach, and similar projects in a way that students might actually pay attention to. We know that these stories don’t often land with prospective students, but right now they’re likely to take pride in the fact that a university they plan to attend is working towards the public good in a high-profile way.

- ✓ **Connect virtually**
Students who feel that they’re missing out on the chance to visit their shortlisted university or meet other prospective students would benefit from ways to emulate these experiences virtually. Many - if not all - universities are running online open days, which will go some way to addressing this. But the key thing for students is to be able to talk to others about their decision, whether that’s current students or others planning to attend a particular institution. If you are able to connect these groups with each other so they can build these connections, you’ll help to build that community earlier than they might expect.



THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY

Family is a huge factor at this stage in students' decision-making, and this year that influence is greatly magnified. If only due to the imposed proximity of lockdown, students are talking more to their parents and other family members than they might normally do, which is - despite further confusion and lack of information for parents - helping them cope with the situation more effectively.

“My family was surprised that exams were cancelled. They thought they would be postponed. **But they're being really supportive.**”

“My family seem more relaxed now and have come to terms with it.”

“My parents are even more confused than me. They were unprepared. They're trying to help me to not feel stressed - they want me to protect my mental health. But they're trying to stay relaxed.”

“My family are confused - they want to feel like the grade decision is fair.”

“My parents are reassuring and realistic. Some aren't as lucky on my group chat, their parents are being more dramatic.”

“My head of sixth form has **emailed to say it's very concerning.** He's going to try to help when he has information.”

“The UCAS support teacher contacted me to check which universities I had chosen as Firm and Insurance, to make sure I had made a sensible decision.”

“I talk to teachers mostly for advice - **they say to not be stressed, still carry on doing the work whether it counts or not because it will all prepare you for university.**”

Some students suggested that their parents were less concerned about the immediate impact of the pandemic on their children's grades, but on what this would mean for their long-term prospects - ie, would the results of this year always be seen as “the Covid-19 year”? Students who mentioned this were themselves more focused on their next steps, and felt the longer-term impact was not a big issue for them.

As we've mentioned, personal connections at schools have been one of the more praised aspects of the “official” response to the situation, and those connections also play a part in students' decisions. Even without direct access to careers advisors or sixth form tutors, some students have received helpful advice and guidance from school staff.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?



Connect with parents

Parents are as confused and disoriented by the coronavirus pandemic as students are - possibly more so. If universities are able to provide advice tailored to parents about how they are dealing with this year's applications, it will go a long way to relieving that particular mental strain. This will vary depending on what you can say, but could involve reassurance that you're likely to be lenient about required grades, that you have special support available for students in September, or even simply offering a way for them to contact you with their personal concerns.



Address long-term concerns

We heard that many parents are more concerned about the long-term effects of this unusual grading and acceptance process on their child's futures, so we suggest addressing this in some way - perhaps using alumni success stories or other evidence of the work you do on careers and employability. Knowing that graduates can succeed whatever difficult start they might have had will help them to feel more comfortable about this situation.



Collaborate with schools and colleges

Without wanting to step on the toes of teachers - who are already doing a difficult job in unusual circumstances - it might be helpful to find ways of working with schools and colleges to keep their year 12 students engaged with the learning process. These students are also in a key point in their decision-making around university, and will need encouragement about what the future holds for them in 2021. Their teachers are likely to be an important influence on them, and they will want to know that universities are also trying to support future intakes as well as this year's students.



UNEXPECTED RESULTS DAY



GRADING CONCERNS

The grading process that was announced soon after schools were closed was met with a mixture of confusion, dismay, and acceptance by students. Their teachers and school administrators tried to provide explanations, but these did not provide the clarity that many students wanted.

The vast majority of A-level students were expecting their grades to rest on how well they performed in their final exams. Because of this, they now feel that a chance to prove themselves has been taken away - a feeling that is especially strong among those who might not have taken their mock exams or other preparatory work very seriously.

“My friends are very stressed. Some of them didn't work very hard this year, but they were hoping to knuckle down for the exams and they think they're quite far off the grades they need.”

“My friends are responding quite badly. They were hoping to be able to pull things out of the bag in their exams. That opportunity has been taken away from them.”

“I have been taking lessons through video calls and completing online tests. It has worried me as I had finally started to work really hard and my final grades may not reflect my current work.”

As well as feeling like they won't have the chance to demonstrate their ability, there is a high degree of conscientiousness among some students. They are concerned that they might “sneak through” with a higher grade than they might have actually got in an exam, and that they will feel guilty about receiving a grade they do not deserve.

“I feel as though I don't deserve the predicted grades. I haven't worked for it.”

Much of the anxiety around grades comes from a lack of faith in their teachers to accurately predict their grades. However unfounded this might be, the knowledge that their grades are now reliant on people they actually have a direct connection to, rather than the implacable impartiality of the exam board, leads to a lot of worry.

“My future should be decided on my actions and it is now based on my teachers' opinion instead.”

“It's slightly worrying as it's based on teachers' assessment of what we'll get. You don't get along with every teacher as well as you might like. If they're going to give you a grade that's affected by your relationship that might be worrying.”

“I'm struggling with trusting teachers with grades. It's a guess. At least with exams, you can predict your own grades based on how hard you've worked and revised.”

Despite the concern around the grading process itself, there is also acceptance - as there is with many reactions to the coronavirus pandemic - that this is the best response in a difficult situation. They might not be completely happy about it, but students understand that there isn't really a better option.

“I feel like it is what it is.”

“The way they're grading sounds fair, though mocks don't reflect actual exams.”

ANGER ABOUT AUGUST

While the process of how their grades will finally be decided was met with worried resignation, the announcement that students would receive their A-level results on the originally-planned date of August 13th was decidedly unpopular.

The good will that students felt towards their teachers and the exam boards in a difficult situation did not extend to this news - they did not understand why they would have to wait so long or what would happen in that time that warranted the delay.

“I found out about results day on the BBC News app. I'm worried as it only gives me a month to decide what to do if I don't get the grades for [university]. There's not much time for me to revise for potential Autumn exams.”

“I think the dates are too late - this is poor planning from the government.”

“I don't understand why results day hasn't been moved forward. It leaves a short turnaround for us students to respond to the consequences of our grades.”

Part of this anger came from an earlier announcement that results could be released in July, leading students to believe they would have a longer period of time over the summer to make informed decisions about their futures. When the true date was announced, it reinforced the feeling of abandonment that many were already feeling. Even those who had been the most practical and accepting were less than happy with the additional delay.

“I had to scream about that to my friends. It makes no sense. It's such a strange and bizarre time we're all in, so why not give us a bit more time? Those extra few weeks could make a huge difference - why not give us the results early? It doesn't make sense to us, and there's no-one we can ask about it.”

“[Results] are too late. They should be done in late June or early July. There's no reason for them to be mid-August. It makes it difficult to plan ahead and know what to do.”

“We're getting our A-level results on August 13th they said July at first... so if this lockdown is over and I'm still gonna be spending summer stressing.”



WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

✓ Try to provide answers as best you can

The time students feel they would have had to make informed decisions upon receiving their grades has now been shortened. If you are able to provide them with advice before this date, this will help alleviate their feelings of being abandoned. Although you may not be able to give them the precise answers they are seeking, even telling them about the support you have available once the results are released - how to contact the admissions team, who to call about finance options, whatever is suitable - will let them know that they're being looked after.

✓ Remember that everyone is different

Relatedly, any communications with students should be as tailored as possible. If a student is concerned that they may just miss their required grades, explain what you might be able to do in that situation, even if that's just pointing them to official advice from the DfE.

✓ Be that lifeline

Keep in touch with them. They are now just waiting for their results, and many feel that they can't contact their schools - so their chosen university might be able to offer a lifeline. Again, you may not be able to directly address their worries about their final grades, but even just being in touch can be enough.



WHAT DO THEY WANT TO HEAR?

FEELING UNINFORMED

One of the biggest struggles for students is that they just don't know what's happening.

While their schools or colleges have tried to explain the grading process to them, they still feel they have not been given enough detail to make them feel reassured. In many cases, following an initial explanation from their teachers or tutors, they have then been asked not to ask further questions, leading them to feel abandoned and unsupported.

“Teachers have said not to ask them about grades, so we don't really ask.”

“We're not really getting anything from the school. The information we're getting is from the media.”

“It feels like students are getting left in the dark. Information from Government and the people in charge at school isn't really there.”

The reaction to information from official sources is mixed. Some feel that the government, UCAS and others are doing their best, but others still feel that there's a lack of clarity about the grading and admissions process.

“I used the GOV.UK website, but it's confusing as there's a lot of information on there.”

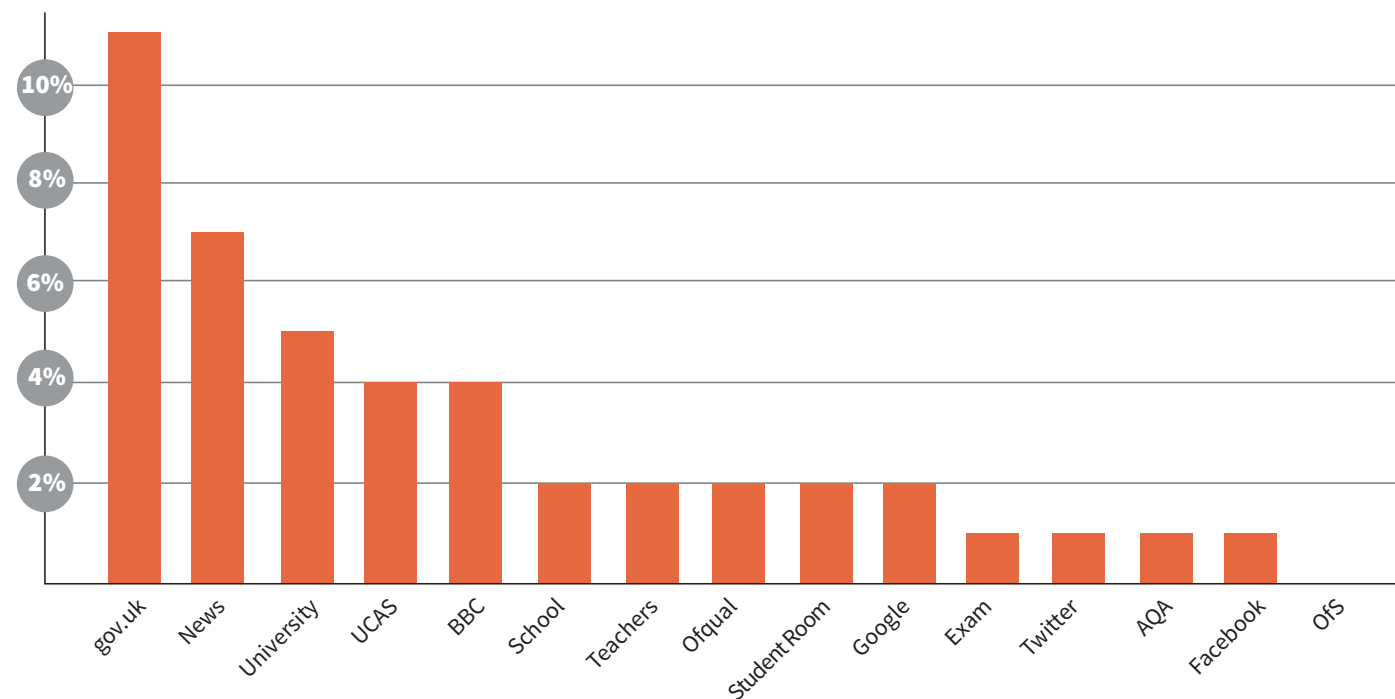
“I received some emails from UCAS - but no one really knows what to expect, so it seems like empty promises.”

“UCAS hosted an online panel that was really good to clear up questions. It was comprised of the CEO of UCAS, the Ofqual Director, and the Universities Minister.”

Despite saying that they felt uninformed by official sources, nearly half of the students were not actively seeking out information about how their studies would be affected by the pandemic. They were more likely to find information passively, either through social media or traditional news sources.

Those who were looking for help would look on government websites first, with some saying that they had looked at the websites of other official bodies such as UCAS or Ofqual. Some also said that they had been asking universities directly for information, though this was not always successful. None of the students had looked for information on the OfS website.

WHERE STUDENTS LOOKED FOR INFORMATION:



UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS

Students are even less likely to have received helpful information from universities that they've applied to. Some have sent generic, catch-all emails to applicants, and others have sent nothing at all. There have been examples of positive messages, but even those tend not to offer solutions.

“[University] emailed every week - they say no student will be disadvantaged by what is going on, so I'm not that worried. That really helps me to feel reassured.”

“All universities have been in touch with fond wishes, but none have any meaningful or clear information to offer.”

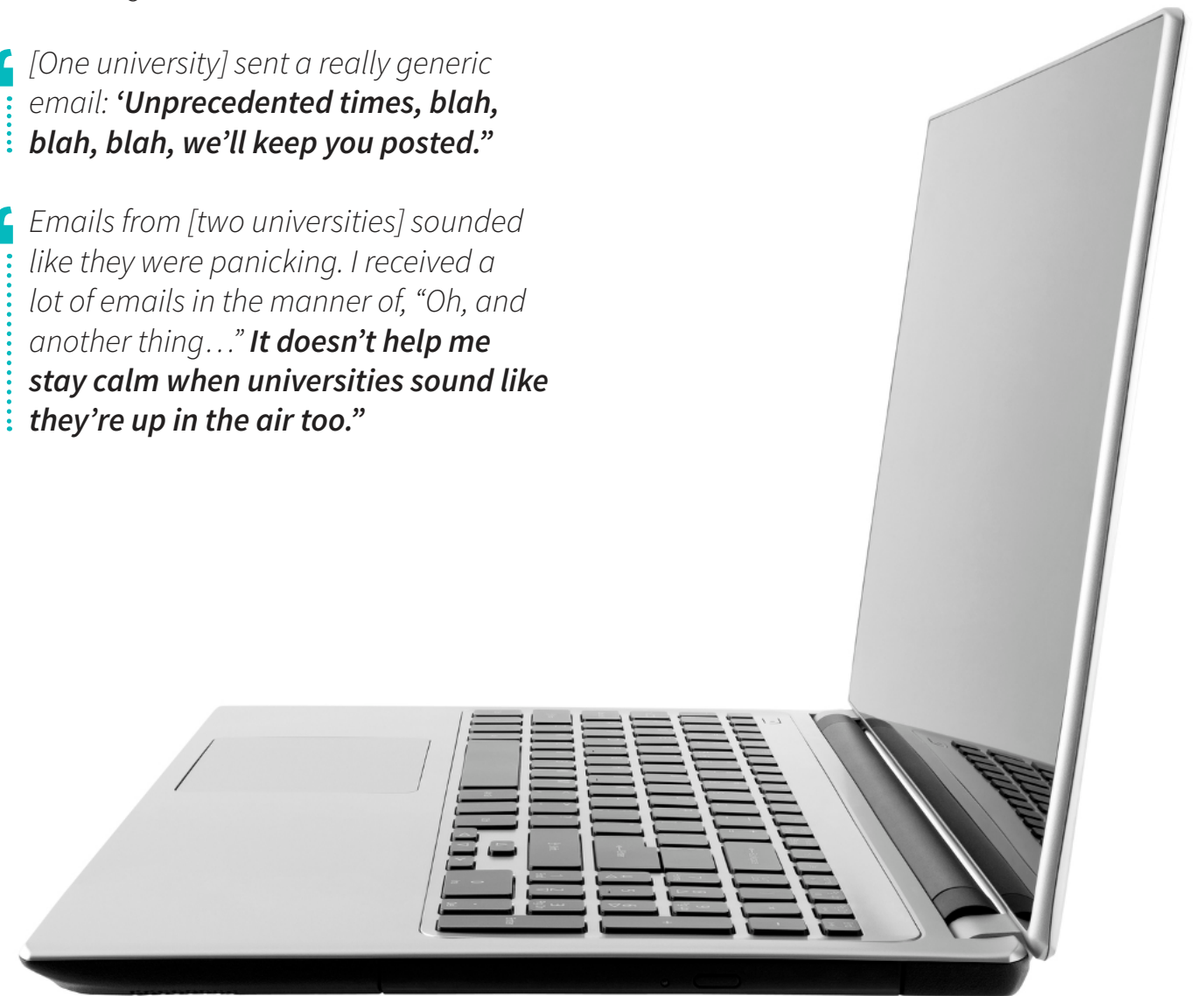
“[One university] sent a really generic email: 'Unprecedented times, blah, blah, blah, we'll keep you posted.'”

“Emails from [two universities] sounded like they were panicking. I received a lot of emails in the manner of, 'Oh, and another thing...' It doesn't help me stay calm when universities sound like they're up in the air too.”

What students consider even worse than communications that don't actually help them with their uncertainty are communications that actively ignore it. Although students understand that this was an unexpected shock for everyone, they would like to think that universities aren't just carrying on as normal - but in some cases that's exactly what's happened.

“[One university] invited me to choose my accommodation, despite it only being my Insurance.”

“[They] sent other emails, but more generic about finances and paperwork for university, not COVID related stuff.”



Although students are clearly keen to hear from official sources, the universities they have applied to have been slow to provide them with information they consider helpful or supportive. More than half of the students who responded had not received any information from the universities they had applied to.

“I’ve had nothing!
I’m so mad about it too!”

Some had received what they classed as “holding messages” - communications that explained the current situation and offered support, but in a way that did not feel like it addressed those students’ concerns. A few received more targeted information that made them feel like the university sending it had thought about who that student was and what they might want to hear.

“They have said that they will take into consideration the circumstances of the outbreak and if I don’t get the desired grades then they will be able to give support on next steps.”

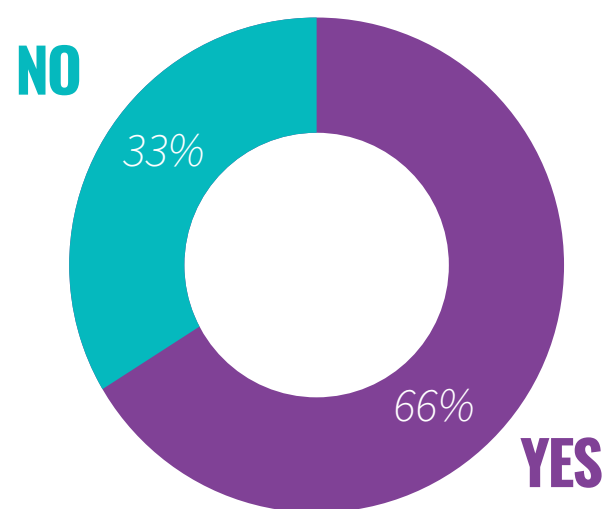
The way that universities have communicated with them - or not - during the pandemic has not helped students feel reassured about the situation. When asked how reassured they felt by universities’ communications since the lockdown, students gave them an average score of around 46 out of 100 - a score that in many cases was influenced by the lack of any communication.

“They have sent some emails with little information which is not very helpful.”

When we asked those students who had received information if it helped them to feel more reassured, the answer was more positive - 66% said they felt reassured by what they’d received.

WE ASKED...

Does the information you have received from universities make you feel reassured?



INFORMATION NEEDS

When asked what kind of information they would find useful, students were most keen to hear about “practical” things:

- what is being done to tackle the coronavirus outbreak
- what they should do themselves
- social distancing and what they and their families should do to maintain it
- efforts to create a vaccine
- what the NHS is doing to treat people with the disease

Beyond this, they also requested information about their personal situations:

- details (not just generalities) about how universities will deal with applications this year
- will previously-stated grade requirements be flexible, and if so by how much?
- will universities be open in September, and if not what adjustments will they make to their programmes to account for that?

“What would happen to my university offers if my teachers rank me poorly? Can I still keep them and do the exam?”

“How will universities cope with too many applicants applying for the same course?”

“Will universities wait for students taking exams in September, or will they just start the same time as normal?”

They also want more information about how they’ll be awarded their grades. There is a high degree of uncertainty about how the new system will affect students, especially those who might have been relying on their exams as an opportunity to make a last-minute leap for a higher grade. Students want to know both that their teachers will grade them fairly and accurately, but also that universities will be lenient about offering places to people who don’t quite achieve what they were originally predicted.

REAL CONNECTIONS

Where students might not feel reassured by the messages they're receiving at an institutional level, they tend to be more positive when there's a "real" person involved.

Emails from specific people at a school or university are cited as having a positive effect, even if these people are also unable to address the student's overarching concerns. Even an online Q&A can help with this feeling, as it reinforces the impression that real people out there are looking after students' interests.

“ I messaged the associate professor to ask for work before the course starts - he sent a speedy response with a pre-reading list.”

“ [University] held a Q and A for offer holders with the Dean of Admissions which addressed some concerns.”

“ School has been communicating regularly around mental health support. My Physics teacher sends suggested podcasts, my form tutor checks in and shares what books he's been reading (for fun). It just keeps some connection going.”

“ School message us every day. The headteacher sends a “mini-assembly” email every morning. It contains updates and tips about lockdown life. My form tutor has been in touch about welfare. It feels good, but some of my friends at other schools haven't heard from their school at all.”

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

✓ **Treat people like people**
However students are mentally coping with the pandemic and its effects, they want to feel like their situation is being acknowledged. As we've mentioned earlier, they would welcome communication from the universities they have applied to - but this information has to acknowledge their concerns and make them feel like they are being thought of as people, not just contacts in a database. Definitely do not send them emails that seem to be part of a standard schedule that hasn't changed since before the pandemic.

✓ **Signpost to actual contacts**
If you are able to, try to offer them the chance to contact a real person at the university. This could be someone in the admissions office, in the department they'll study in, in the students' union - whoever it is, the feeling that there's an individual behind the messages they receive will, again, make them realise that they are being looked after.

✓ **Host online Q&A sessions**
In a similar vein, online Q&A sessions can be another way to provide the personal connection that students want. They are far more likely to be forgiving of a university saying “we don't know” or “we'll have to wait and see” if it comes from a real person.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

CUSTOMER SERVICE

We're not going to debate the treatment of students as customers, but it would be remiss of us not to point out when students themselves raise the issue. The shops and brands they deal with are offering information about what's happening, and, to a certain degree, they expect the same from universities and schools.

The understanding and acceptance of the situation that we found among most students falls away slightly when they consider the potentially transactional nature of their university studies. In some cases they feel that as they will ultimately be paying for their time at university, they can make more demands than they do of their school in a similar situation.

“I wouldn't be happy if we get online teaching. It ruins the university experience, you can't make friends as easily in the first week.”

“Online learning is not what you pay £9,000 a year for.”

“It seems like [university] is doing everything they can do for current students, but if I was paying money to go there right now, I wouldn't be happy.”

“It's a lot of debt if it's just online courses.”

“I'd want to defer the year because I'd miss a lot of opportunities and wouldn't want the debt. It's not the real university experience. **It's not what you're paying for.**”

It's clear from these comments that students feel they are paying for more than just the chance of obtaining a degree - they include other, less tangible elements in what they get for the cost of university.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Despite everything that's going on, students are still looking forward to their time at university. With that in mind, they want to know that their chosen university is supporting its existing students.

We should point out that they are not likely to actively seek this information out for themselves, but they see it on forums or in Facebook groups, or are told by friends at other universities - so they hear about the experiences of others, rather than any official statements from a university.

Knowing what a university is doing for current students would make a difference to their perception of that university, but - notably - not always to their final decision on whether or not to attend.

“If a university handled the situation badly with current students, it would make me lose confidence in that uni and decide not to go.”

“I heard on Twitter that first years at [two universities] have been left in the dark. I follow [a YouTube vlogger] who studies at [university], and it sounds like they haven't been supporting their students either.”

“[University A] students seem to be getting lots of support, unlike [university B], which makes me glad that I chose [university A].”

“I know people at the universities, so I've been hearing what they've been doing. They feel somewhat neglected. But it's such a weird situation that it's hard to judge them for it.”

SEPTEMBER 2020

Related to their comments about how universities are supporting existing students are their feelings about attending university themselves in September. Although most are planning to attend as planned, they have concerns about what kind of experience they will get - and whether this will match what they've been looking forward to, what they've been told by other students, and what the universities themselves have promised.

“I'd rather have a normal experience.”

“You physically go to university for the experience. I would defer a year rather than risk partial online teaching.”

“I would struggle with no Freshers' Week - and you don't get the social experience of university. I'd defer a year if [university] moved to online teaching.”

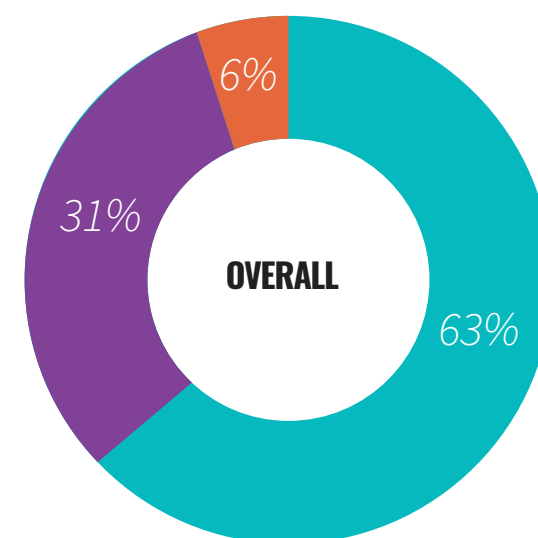
For some, attendance in September is less about the university experience and more about their grades. The option of resitting has always been there, but for many the opportunity to prove themselves against the real exam and not rely on their teachers' assessment is appealing.

“I am willing to redo this year if necessary to get better A level grades. My friends are too. If I'm going to be in education for so many years, then what's another year?”

WE DISCOVERED THAT...

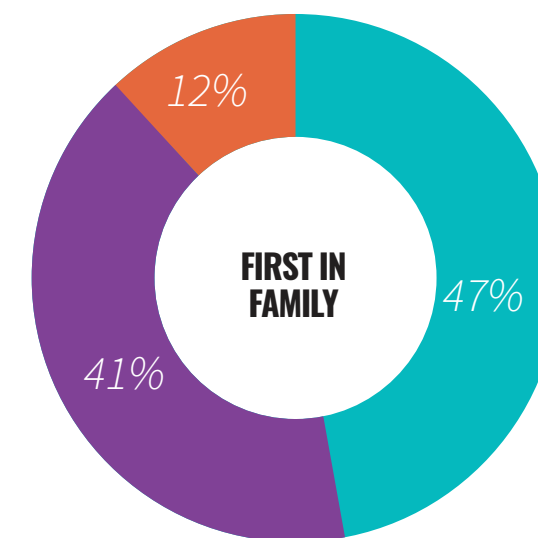
The majority of students are **still planning to attend university in September.**

- Yes, I will still be attending this year
- I'm unsure of whether to attend or defer
- No, I will be deferring until next year



They feel that they've been working towards this goal for years, and don't want to be put off. There is also a high number of undecided respondents, who are yet to make up their mind about taking a place when the new term starts.

However, those students who would be the first in their family to attend university are more likely to be undecided about attending this year - less than half have definite plans to attend, and they are twice as likely to be planning to defer their education for a year.



ONLINE LEARNING

The idea of universities moving to online learning is not immediately offputting to students, with 50% of the survey respondents saying that this would not change the likelihood of them attending a given university. That said, in responses to questions about how their existing studies have been affected, many stated that the online provision at their school is detrimental to their ability to learn, slower than in-person teaching, and makes them feel less supported.

Some see online teaching as a short-term measure - something that would only last a few months, then would return to normal. If that were the case, they'd accept this inconvenience while universities work out a long-term solution.

“I would still go. It's a one-time situation and a lot of time and effort has gone into picking a university.”

“The pandemic is only a short period of time, so it's only a few months out of a long medical degree.”

“If it's for the sake of keeping everyone safe, then I wouldn't mind doing online teaching, because I'm doing it now anyway.”

Others, as noted previously, want the whole experience, and are worried about missing out on opportunities.

“If they handled [online learning] badly, I would not go to that uni. [A pandemic] may not happen often, but something similar could happen and Dentistry is a long course.”

“I feel like it's a big change in how we learn and to start it on your own, in your room, might be quite unsettling, especially when you've been on a long period not doing any work, to just switch back into that, might be hard to do.”

“If I do get my grades, but [university] switches to online teaching in September, then I will also take a year out.”

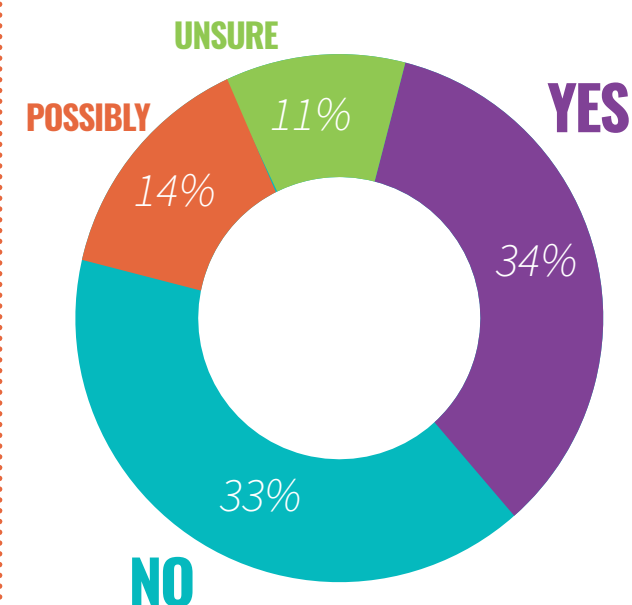
“I'm tempted to defer because Musical Theatre is such a physical course. I'd likely delay if teaching switched to online. I once tried dance lessons online and it didn't work.”

If universities are to offer online provision in September 2020, students will need to be convinced that their institutions can overcome the issues they've already encountered when their schools made the switch to online courses.

The possibility of university teaching moving online seems to make some difference to whether or not a student is likely to consider deferring. Those who have not yet decided on their plans for September are much more likely to consider an alternative university or to defer their place if asked to study online.

WE ASKED...

If your chosen university were to announce that teaching was moving online in September, would that make you reconsider studying at that university?



LONG-TERM GOALS

Although these students have had their lives interrupted and their plans disrupted by the pandemic, their long-term aims for their future are still there - they still want to attend university, they still have the same career goals, they still want to enjoy their time as young people.

Even those who are reconsidering their immediate decisions about deferring or choosing a different university still have long-term goals in mind.

“I hope to be a financial analyst in the future. This hasn't changed my long-term plans.”

“I want to study medicine at postgraduate level, complete a surgical residency and become a plastic surgeon. [...] I'd still enrol even with online teaching.”

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

- ✓ **Champion the success stories of online learning**
The online learning experience students might have received already is likely to have been rushed, unprepared and consequently given them a bad impression of how online learning can work. If you can provide evidence of online learning successes, either through your past experiences running remote courses, or through positive feedback from current students, this will help to mitigate the effects of that preconception.
- ✓ **Things have changed - run with it**
Alongside this, you should acknowledge that things will not be the same in 2020 as they have in the past. If you have any details about how teaching and learning will take place in September, tell prospective students. Find out what aspects are likely to worry them most and address those specific concerns. See if they can attend a sample lecture or seminar online to experience it for themselves. Your honesty will go a long way to making them feel more secure in their choice.

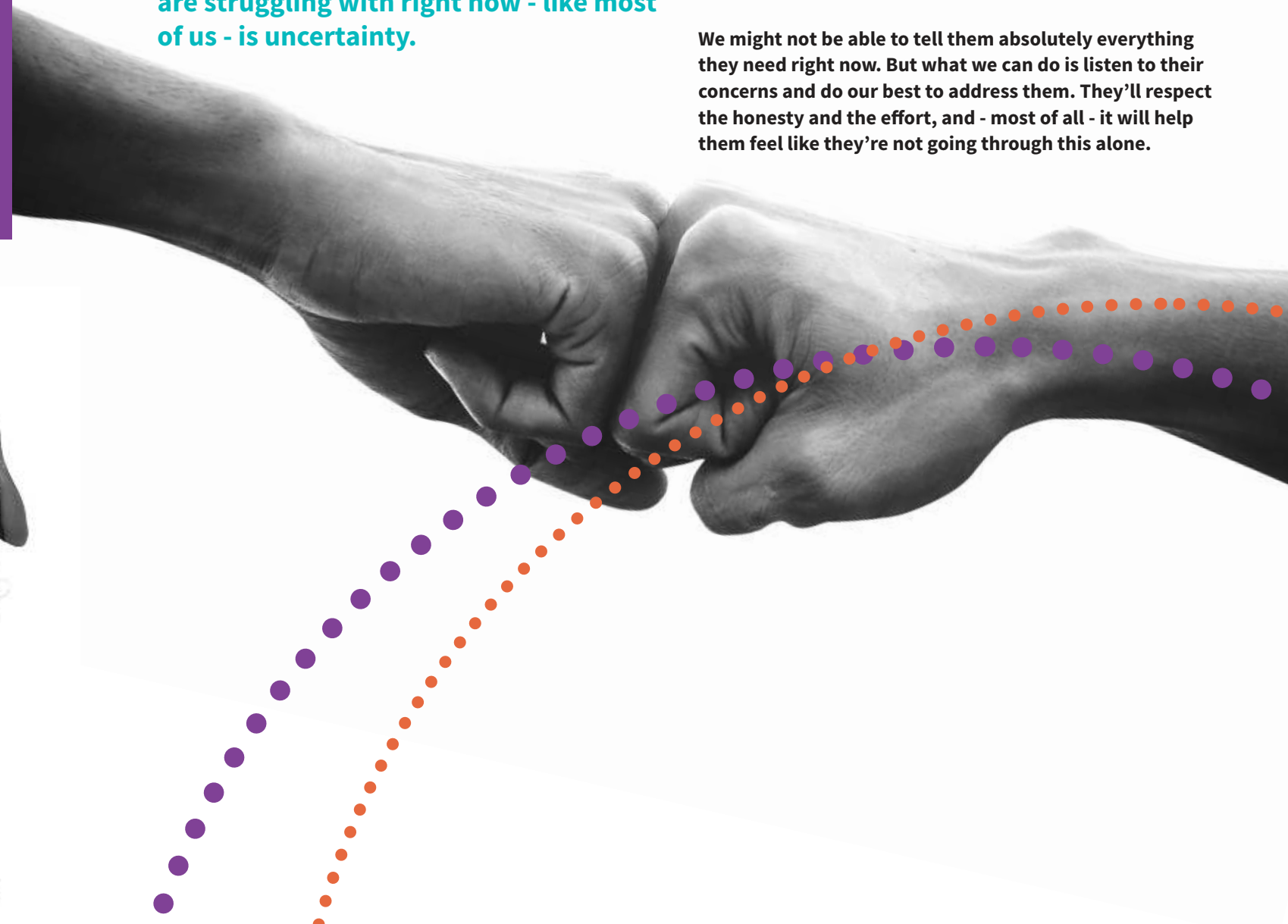
- ✓ **Consider the 'university experience' in a Covid-19 world**
Students who want the "university experience" might be put off by the thought of a socially-distanced social life. Find out what your current students have been doing to stay connected in lockdown, and work with them to tell stories that demonstrate that, although it can't be the same as it has in previous years, the student experience can still be enjoyable and fulfilling.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic and its subsequent effects have had a huge impact on the lives of students in the UK. It has turned their lives upside down, and they have reacted in an understandably emotional way. Despite this, they have proven to be resilient - they are still looking for ways to continue learning, and they still have goals in mind for their future. What they are struggling with right now - like most of us - is uncertainty.

This is a hugely important time for these students, and there is a correspondingly huge role for universities to play in addressing the uncertainty they are facing. It's a difficult time for everyone, and - as we've seen - students do understand that. But they also want to feel reassured that, right now, as they face one of the biggest decisions of their lives, they are being thought of as people. For some, the way they have been communicated with so far has not made them feel that way. Others do feel that they've been talked to by real people who understand what they're going through. They're hearing on-the-ground stories from current students about what's happening in universities, and they want to know the truth.

We might not be able to tell them absolutely everything they need right now. But what we can do is listen to their concerns and do our best to address them. They'll respect the honesty and the effort, and - most of all - it will help them feel like they're not going through this alone.





WHO ARE PICKLE JAR COMMUNICATIONS?

Pickle Jar Communications is a content strategy and digital communications consultancy for the education sector. We've worked with over over 200 schools, colleges and universities in almost 30 countries and across four continents to help them achieve their goals by improving how they connect with their audiences.

Get in touch to find out how we can help you.

For more information or to discuss this report and its findings, please contact:

Robert Perry, Head of Research and Insights.
robert@picklejarcommunications.com





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