



Impacts of COVID-19 on Learners in West Yorkshire (Supplementary Report)

Findings from Go Higher West Yorkshire & Cosmos Engagement's
*Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Learners and
White Boys from Working-Class Backgrounds* research projects



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Background & Methodology

In 2020, Go Higher West Yorkshire commissioned Cosmos Engagement to conduct research investigating the educational experiences, challenges and support needs of two key underrepresented groups: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Learners and White Boys from Working-Class Backgrounds. The findings from these two research projects are presented in two distinct reports delivered to GHWY.

Due to the timing of the project, which was adjusted as a result of these events, this gave us an opportunity to ask these learners about their experiences around COVID-19 as associated impacts on their education and future plans. Due to the extent of feedback and content collected from learners in discussing these topics, the decision was made to produce a separate supplementary report focusing on COVID-19 and its impacts which are applicable, but not exclusive to the two target groups.

METHODOLOGIES

Carried out for the wider research investigations

Research investigations into the educational landscape and opportunities for progression into Higher Education (HE) for the following groups:

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Learners

White Boys from Working-Class Backgrounds

Qualitative interviews and discussion groups with 37 learners including:

- 10 South Asian learners (5 KS4 and 5 FE)
- 9 Black African learners (4 KS4 and 5 FE)
- 7 Black Caribbean learners (4 KS4 and 3 FE)
- 8 Mixed Heritage learners (4 KS4 and 4 FE)
- 3 Polish learners (all FE)

34/37 BAME learners resided in POLAR4 Quintiles 1-2 (lowest representation in HE) with 23/37 learners residing in West Yorkshire

The first phase of learner discussions took place between November and December 2020.

Follow-up interviews were completed with 11 FE learners between January and February 2021.

Qualitative interviews and discussion groups with 18 learners and 6 stakeholders including:

- 12 FE learners
- 6 KS4 learners
- 6 staff/stakeholders from two institutions in West Yorkshire with experience working with boys from working-class background:

All boys we spoke to resided in West Yorkshire and POLAR4 Quintiles 1&2.

The first phase of learner discussions took place in December 2020.

Follow-up interviews were completed with 5 FE learners in February 2021.

WIDER CONTEXT

Supporting Evidence

In December 2020, The Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) published a report titled **‘What happened to the COVID cohort?’**, focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on university applications. It describes how “the impact of COVID on students, especially those from a lower socio economic background, was one of the biggest concerns the education sector faced this year, with many fearing that the progress seen over the past decade would be reversed”. However, despite these fears and the challenges surrounding COVID-19, it was found that “more students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds across the UK entered HE in 2020 than ever before. This was reflected even in the most selective universities and courses.” UCAS suggests a number of factors behind this trend including prospective student perceptions of Higher Education as a “stable option” during a turbulent time for the labour market, an increased number of students meeting entry requirements based on “centre assessment grades” and government-increased capacity across HE.

Despite indications of progress in 2020 (overall entry rate rose to a record 37%; record numbers of acceptances from the lowest participation areas; increased acceptances for underrepresented students at higher tariff universities), UCAS suggests that the upcoming class of 2021 may be more severely impacted by gaps in their education and progression support over the past year and will need to play “catch up”. Coupled with a rising 18 year old population (around 90,000 additional applicants are expected by 2025), without growth in university places, it is expected that competition will increase, with those from underrepresented backgrounds being more likely to miss out in years to come.

The UCAS report also highlights an increase in the number of university students declaring mental health issues. It is unclear whether this increase is due to the impacts of COVID-19 itself or an already existing issue, but with the continuing mental health challenges associated with the ongoing COVID-19 situation, this should remain an area of focus.

The current report provides a summary of findings from Cosmos’ primary research with learners and stakeholders in relation to COVID-19. It highlights many of the same themes as those described by UCAS and how many of the existing challenges that affect young people from underrepresented backgrounds may now be exacerbated due to recent events. It is within this context of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 that Go Higher West Yorkshire and other organisations should now fully understand and support learners’ needs where they can.

Source:

UCAS (2020) What Happened to The Covid Cohort? Lessons for levelling up in 2021 and beyond. End of Cycle Report 2020.

Summary of Impacts

Primary research with learners and stakeholders revealed the following impacts of COVID-19 on learners' educational experiences and future plans, each of which are explored in more depth in the remainder of this report.

- Time Away from School/College
- Exam Cancellations, Teacher-Assessed Grades
- Difficulties with Virtual Learning
- Academic Challenges and Support
- Limited Progression Support
- Transitions between Academic Years & Institutions
- Impacts on Future Intentions
- Personal and Social Impacts
- Mental health challenges

While it is also likely that some learners may have experienced other difficulties around COVID-19 within their family (e.g. financial, physical or mental health difficulties), these were not discussed within our research, which focused on learners' experiences in relation their education.

Impacts Explored

Time Away from School/College

Undoubtedly the most significant educational impact of COVID-19 on learners, and a driver of many other impacts discussed in this section, is the amount of time that learners have spent away from school/college. This has affected not only learners' schooling, but their social and everyday lives. Learners expressed that the extent and impact of their "time off" had been much longer and worse than they had expected; with some who were perhaps pleased when schools/colleges were first closed – something they expected to be short-term – having experienced significant negative impacts over the course of the last year. Almost all learners agreed that learning from home was inferior to normal learning in school/college and many described missing time with friends.

Exam Cancellations, Teacher-Assessed Grades

Another impact of COVID-19 that some learners initially thought would be a positive, but often turned out not to be so, was the cancellation of exams in summer 2020. While for some this was a relief to not have to prepare for or complete their final GCSE exams for example, others felt that their previous preparations had been wasted. Some learners also felt concern and regret that their assessments would now be influenced by mock exams that they had not done so well in. A number of learners found themselves disappointed with their teacher-assessed grades and one Polish learner suggested she and other "foreign" students had received lower grades because of their "status". Two White learners also suggested that children from working-class backgrounds may be more negatively impacted by teacher-assessed grades than children from "better" backgrounds or schools.

Some of those who made it from KS4 to FE via their teacher-assessed grades felt underprepared for the next academic stage, without having proven their grades. The experience of teacher-assessed grades in academic year 2019-20 and the expectation of something similar in 2020-21, rather than reducing exam pressure as some might have expected, has actually increased the sense of pressure for many learners who are now aware that "everything is assessed", contributing to a more continuous level of stress compared to the previously expected exam build-up.

“ “ *I feel like teachers need to understand that not everyone can work independently. I might not have found it as difficult, but I know some of my friends took a hard hit from that. It might just be because they like being able to sit at the front of a class and ask the teacher some questions. But when they're at home they're not able to do that. I feel like some teachers need to start opening their emails and responding to students and that will probably help people a lot more.*

FE learner ” ”

“ “ *I was unhappy with my grades. And I felt like some people that were foreign, they got unequal grades because of their life status. Most of my friends got higher grades than me and I was curious. I've been trying a lot harder than them and they haven't been studying at all. I've been studying. I've been asking for help. And while I still got the same grades I'd been getting for the past couple of years. So why did that happen? How is that possible?*

FE learner (Polish) ” ”

“ “ *Because of COVID, I do think that we – especially this year's year 11s and 13s – are under so much more pressure than the previous years. We've just been through a pandemic and basically had to teach ourselves for six months, and my mocks are in a few weeks. Our mocks are important anyway, but these ones are extra important because these could be our GCSEs.*

KS4 learner ” ”

Difficulties with Virtual Learning

As mentioned already, learners generally agreed that the quality of virtual learning from home was inferior to that of normal in-person schooling. Many learners described work being given to them with little explanation and being expected to learn on their own more than they ever had before. As well as the inherent differences and difficulties of learning (even well-presented) content online, some learners also experienced practical challenges such as technical and connectivity problems and finding necessary space and quiet in homes shared with parents and siblings also working or learning from home. Learners also experienced **digital fatigue** due to spending so much time on computers. As such, it is unsurprising that learners describe struggling with **concentration** and **motivation**, without the normal benefits of getting up and out to school, free periods at college, or the movement and variety experienced in their normal lives; faced instead with repetitive days of excessive screen time and social isolation.

While all of these challenges persist in the most recent lockdowns and school closures, with individuals experiencing their own peaks and troughs of motivation, learners who took part in our follow-up interviews in January-February 2021 generally suggested that virtual teaching and learning had improved compared to the first lockdown and school closures. Teachers and learners had both seemingly learnt from their earlier experiences and were better prepared next time around.

Technical difficulties such as computer and internet access were mentioned as an impediment to learning and working from home, and participants suggested that this was a challenge that “working class” children may be more likely to suffer with. More **practical courses**, including art and plumbing, were also more likely to be negatively impacted by virtual learning than more academic subjects.

“ “ *It’s been quite annoying having to be in smaller groups and bubbles. It means that we can’t be with as many friends sometimes, if they’re in other groups. And also, we have to stay in the same room so it can be quite annoying and repetitive being in that same environment.*

FE learner

” ”

“ “ *I’d say it’s had an effect on your social skills. Since you’ve not talked to that many people in a long time, you might have lost loads of friends and stuff.*

KS4 learner

” ”

“ “ *For me, my high school sends emails every day. My college obviously sends emails every day about any opportunities for us, but everything is a webinar. So many students have been bullied and they’ve been struggling to get online because of social bullying online and cyberbullying. And it’s been difficult for some of them to go on a webinar and be on a webcam to get an extra opportunity, because we haven’t been used to that. And there’s just been this whole year, it’s like using excessive technology. Everybody wants to go back to the normal teaching, so we don’t have to look at the screen for two hours sometimes.*

FE learner

” ”

“ “ *I know that Black people and ethnic minorities are more at risk from COVID, so that’s a big worry of mine. My form tutor is Black, and he’s been really like ‘this is going to affect you a lot more – take it seriously’.*

KS4 learner (Mixed Heritage)

” ”

Academic Challenges and Support

Related to the previous issue, many learners have inevitably found it difficult to obtain the academic support that they might need; with restricted ability to ask teachers quick questions in the way they would at school/college, though again this does appear to have improved in later school/college closures – with schools/colleges and teachers now better prepared and organised in their delivery of teaching and support. These challenges are exacerbated by the large chunks of content that learners have missed and the need to “catch up” and “cram” more content into subsequent periods, adding to the stress that many learners feel.

Limited Progression Support

As well as academic support, learners have inevitably missed out on much of the support with progression (careers advice, fairs, guest speakers etc.) that they would have received in a normal school/college year. Teachers and schools/colleges have understandably been dealing with the challenges of adapting to online teaching of academic content as a priority, meaning that other aspects around support with progression have fallen by the wayside. Some such support has been delivered online, however as with academic teaching, this is generally seen to be of a lesser quality than in-person. Meanwhile some valuable in-person experiences such as higher education campus visits have been cancelled altogether.

Transitions between Academic Years & Institutions

As mentioned previously, learners have also suffered from a lack of what would ideally be a smooth transition between academic years or between KS4 and FE. This has been impacted by the general gap in schooling, the loss of the normal exam-results cycle and the lack of normal induction days that normally play an important role in such transitions. As such, many learners have found the transition from Year 10 to Year 11, or particularly from Year 11 to college, to be challenging. Many learners found themselves entering new college environments in September without having experienced any normal induction days, without having completed their GCSE exams and without having been in school for almost half a year.

“ *It’s massively affected my education. I’ve fallen behind in lots of subjects. Throughout lockdown I had no access to a computer. I couldn’t complete the work online. There was nothing I could do until I got back. We’re still getting punished for not meeting these fake deadlines, when the official deadlines are much later, because they’re trying to squeeze so much in.*

KS4 learner



“ *It’s harder to get any help you might need when you’re learning from home – you just try to find the solution yourself. Teachers could maybe make the lessons and activities more understandable.*

FE learner



“ *I was crying a few weeks ago. I think it was a mixture of the fact that COVID was coming round again for another lockdown, schools were getting closed down, it’s my GCSE year, I’m not going to go to prom and things like that.*

KS4 learner



“ *I think if we're still in this pandemic, when I go to uni, that could be a big problem. If I’m not able to do lectures, I'd be very annoyed. You're paying for the type of learning and you're just getting it online.*

FE learner



“ *In college we were doing about seven hours a day but now we’re doing one or two hours a day. I feel like we’re missing loads. I feel like I’m going to fall really far behind. I want to get an apprenticeship as soon as possible because I feel I would learn a lot more.*

FE learner

Impacts on Future Intentions

When asked how or whether COVID-19 and the associated impacts as described had affected their future intentions, learners generally did not suggest that their preferred educational or career pathway had changed; they still intended to go to college and/or university if this is what they had intended previously. Most expected that the impacts of COVID-19 would be over or at least significantly improved by the time they progressed to their next stage in education, while a couple suggested that they would consider a gap year to extend the window for improvement if this was not the case. Some expressed concern about the potential amount, quality or form of virtual learning they might experience at their next institution. Other learners expressed concern about the impacts of COVID-19 on student social life and living arrangements and that they (and their parents) were now more inclined to want to study at or close to home. However, the most consistent concern was the impact of COVID-19 on learners' preparedness for university, given the significant disruption to a key period in their education. In this regard, educational institutions – like students, must now play “catch up” to give learners the support they need, now more than ever, with this challenging transition.

Personal and Social Impacts

Beyond the academic and progression challenges described, learners have inevitably also suffered from the lack of normal and valuable social interaction and contact with their peers as well as missing out on milestones and memories such as exam results and end of school celebrations. It remains to be seen what the long term personal and social impacts of these challenges on young people will be.

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health was a key theme within our research into White Boys from Working Class Backgrounds. Several boys mentioned challenges in this area specifically in relation to COVID-19, difficulties with anxiety associated with their academic difficulties, increased workload, limited support and an increased sense of pressure regarding ongoing assessments that would likely affect their final grades. Stakeholders agreed that boys from working-class backgrounds were particularly vulnerable to such mental health challenges due to social expectations of masculinity making it difficult for boys to access support.

BAME-specific Impacts

All of the impacts described are applicable to the wider UK school and college population, regardless of ethnicity. However, we did ask BAME learners whether these impacts or concerns were any different for people of their ethnicity than others. Generally, the answer was not; with just a couple of mentions of the much-reported increased risks of COVID-19 to the BAME population and one mention of some negative comments around Chinese people in relation to the spread of the virus*. This might be true from learners' individual perspectives, however it is fair to assume that any challenges that BAME learners experience in education are unlikely to have improved over the past year. Furthermore, given the consistent theme of lack of preparedness for university, any gap between BAME learners and the rest of the population are unlikely to have decreased and may well increase as a result of these impacts.

*Chinese learners were not included in the research.



I feel like I wouldn't want to go to university that's far away now, obviously, because that would be very difficult to do in like the pandemic but I think as well with like accommodation. I don't think I'd be moving out into accommodation because of all that's going on, because obviously I wouldn't want to be stuck there or end up not being there and still have to pay for it. I was originally planning to go in the Manchester area and I was actually debating whether or not I should go into student accommodation, but I've just been put off it now after seeing what's in the news.

FE learner



I'm still keen on university, but it depends if I want to do maybe an apprenticeship instead, so I'm kind of debating between the two at the moment. I've been looking at the BBC apprenticeship for journalism, so I was tempted to do that. It's quite difficult to get on but I'll try. I feel like apprenticeships might be more hands on. I'll get a feel for what it's like to do. I'd probably like to be told about what apprenticeships are available, especially in media, I feel like that would be really helpful for me. I remember when I was actually applying for college, they were saying to do this certain course because it will get us onto better unis. I feel like they are kind of more university focused rather than apprenticeships. I don't hear too much about apprenticeships to be honest.

FE learner



“ I hope the government do something to support us and it's not pretend like COVID didn't happen and expect us to do the same as everyone else. We've missed out on so much that we can't be expected to do the same as normal. I hope there's something there to help us.

White FE learner

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“ Returning after the summer, the disadvantaged pupils and the boys are the most affected by it. They're the ones who will struggle at home to sit down and do the work independently because they can't do it or they don't have the motivation to do it. And these are the pupil who won't have the resources to do it. These are the pupils who we've given electronic devices to. These are the pupils that won't have picked up a pen or a book over the last three months. And so these are the pupils that we'll be doing the work with when they come back.

Head of English (Secondary School)

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“ There will be massive gaps, but not just in terms of content. It's more about what they've missed in terms of skills and emotional development. They have missed a lot of content and they will have issues. But if we're talking about long term effects, I worry about this generation. I think they've lost a lot of the wider input that being in school has on them, and I think that's going to be the biggest barrier..... We've all been living in isolation and lot of people are going to be really struggling with mental health. You're going to have a lot who have become so used to not going to school and it's very scary for them to come back.

Outreach Project Officer

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Recommendations

The impacts of COVID-19 on the learners involved in our research is described in detail in the previous section. What follows is a summary of the key areas of support needed in relation to these impacts. These recommendations represent the experiences of students from under-represented backgrounds who took part in our research and highlight that many of the activities HE providers are already implementing are relevant to these learners.

Academic Support

Given the significant periods away from school/college due to COVID-19 lockdowns, school/college closures and individual isolation, as well as the widely recognised challenges of virtual learning from home and the need to “catch up”, many learners are experiencing significant gaps in their learning and understanding of academic content. Supporting students through these academic challenges, ideally in school/college – but also being prepared and equipped for any potential future school/college closures, should of course remain a continuing priority; with the impacts of COVID-19 likely to affect academic progress for many learners over a number of years.

Transitioning (back) into School, College or University

Following the significant periods of time that learners have spent away from school/college and in the context of continuing concerns and ever-changing policies and measures around COVID-19, many learners are likely to find the transitions back into school – or into new colleges, or later university – challenging from both academic, personal and emotional perspectives. Many learners described the transitions between academic years or institutions in September 2020 as being very difficult and this is likely to remain the case for those who have returned to school/college in spring 2021, and may require several months of adaptation to the changing educational environment and demands. The all-important transition to university, that can be challenging at the best of times, is also expected to be a big leap for many learners who are likely to feel under-prepared as a result of their disrupted education over the past year or so.

It is recommended that institutions are as sensitive and supportive as possible around these challenges and that specific support is provided to help prepare learners for their transitions to university in September 2021 and subsequent years, within the context of COVID-19 and associated challenges.

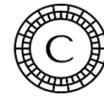
Mental Health Support

In relation to the challenges described previously, the mental health of learners should be an area of continued focus in the aftermath of COVID-19. Long periods of social isolation, re-adapting to the school environment, increased stress around academic challenges and assessments and continuing personal and family concerns around COVID-19 could all contribute to significant mental health challenges for many learners of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. Schools, colleges and universities should focus on protecting learners' mental health and wellbeing as a priority throughout this time. Our research highlights that this may be a particular challenge for boys from working-class backgrounds.

Social Connection & Belonging

Related to the COVID-19 challenges described above, and of particular significance in relation to supporting BAME learners specifically, is the importance of social connection and a sense of belonging. Learners of all backgrounds are likely to have suffered from a lack of normal social interaction and connection with peers in the wake of COVID-19 and this is likely to have been particularly challenging for BAME learners who may experience feelings of isolation and social difficulties in relation to their race at the best of times. Research suggests that a sense of belonging is critical to learners' experience and success at university* and this is likely to be impeded by reduced social opportunities and increased tendency to study at home in the wake of COVID-19. Institutions should increase their efforts to promote a sense of belonging within ethnic communities as well as with the wider student population, via. in-person interaction as and when possible and via. online communities and support networks as well.

*Source: Social-emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: Closing the achievement gap. Bronwyn E. Becker, Suniya S. Luthar (2002)



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