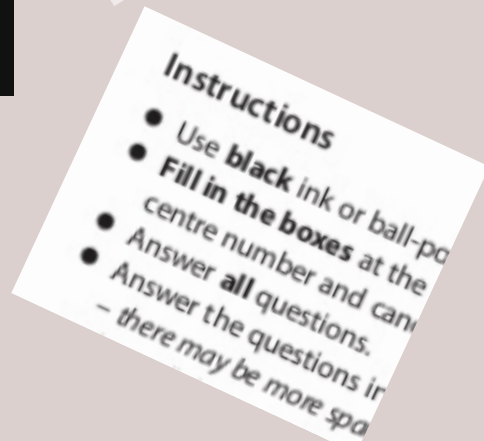
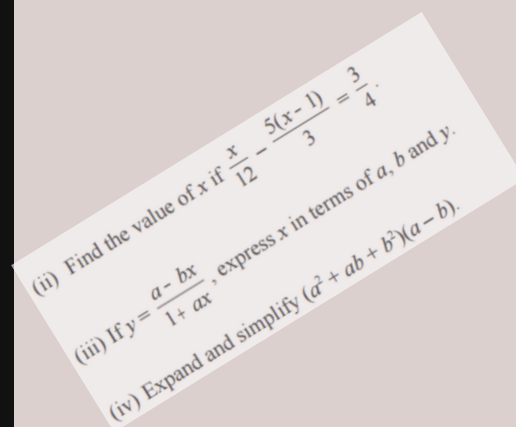


# HOW TO EQUIP UK PUPILS & TEACHERS FOR A RETURN TO SCHOOL IN 2020:

Summary Report & Insights  
from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr Karen Wilson & Jacqueline Weeks  
June 2020





# OVERVIEW

This Report shares pupil insights as a basis for developing a thoughtful support system for pupils, parents and teachers when there is a return to 'normal' schooling in the 2020/21 Academic Year.

110 UK pupils aged between 14 and 19 volunteered to share their perspectives on the impact of the Lockdown associated with the 2020 COVID pandemic. Pupils were asked questions related to their education, mental health during Lockdown, and future prospects. Perspectives were shared through a blend of quantitative survey analysis and qualitative interviews.

We offer insights, recommendations and proposed solutions to use the experience of Lockdown as an opportunity to build resilience embed healthy mental health habits.

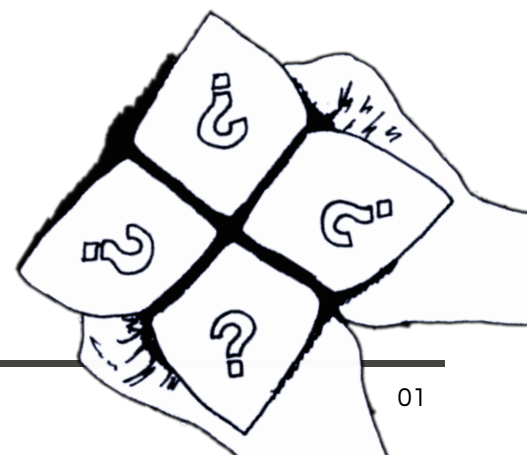
Our Report shines a light on the importance of National Exams for the majority of UK pupils and how, after completing an intensive two-year curriculum, losing the opportunity to demonstrate their ability had an acute negative impact on their mental health.

Survey responses clearly demonstrate heightened anxiety and distress in reaction to exam cancellations (82% of pupils reacted negatively). In addition, there was significant ongoing stress related to environmental uncertainty, the sudden implementation of digital learning, and loss of connection to friends and their community.

There is an entrenched belief amongst pupils that National Exams have a profound impact on future options. This is reinforced by messages received from schools, the media, parents, and peers.

Many pupils (and parents) were shocked at how easily the Government cancelled exams, with no plan in place for grading or for the impact on continuing education. This raised questions about the UK's approach to National Examinations and their real importance in education. Many pupils experienced a sense of loss and confusion surrounding their current and future education. There is clear evidence many were experiencing a natural grieving process.

Drawing on the insights gained from our research and our face-to-face work in UK schools we offer recommendations for Educators, Policy-makers and Parents to equip UK pupils and their teachers for their return to education (and life) post-pandemic.





## THE REPORT

110 UK pupils aged between 14 and 19 shared their perspectives on the impact of the Nationwide Lockdown on their

- mental health
- education
- relationships
- perceived future prospects.

Results are collated from a blend of quantitative survey analysis and qualitative interviews.

While our sample is not large, the insights revealed are clear and consistent across the sample. Responses mirror what we have observed and heard from our 5000-strong pupil (and their parents), the bulk of whom were to sit National UK exams in Summer 2020.

The pupil cohort surveyed comprises pupils from across the UK attending public, private, independent schools, state and grammar schools.

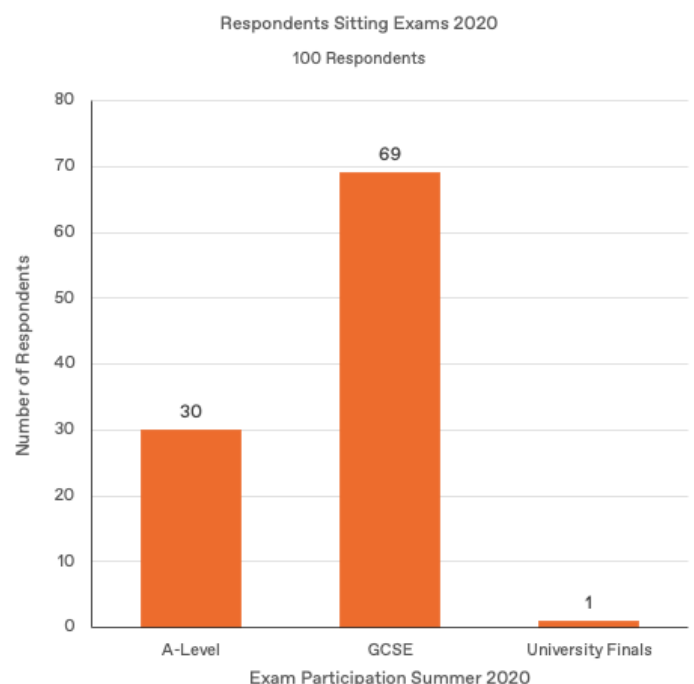
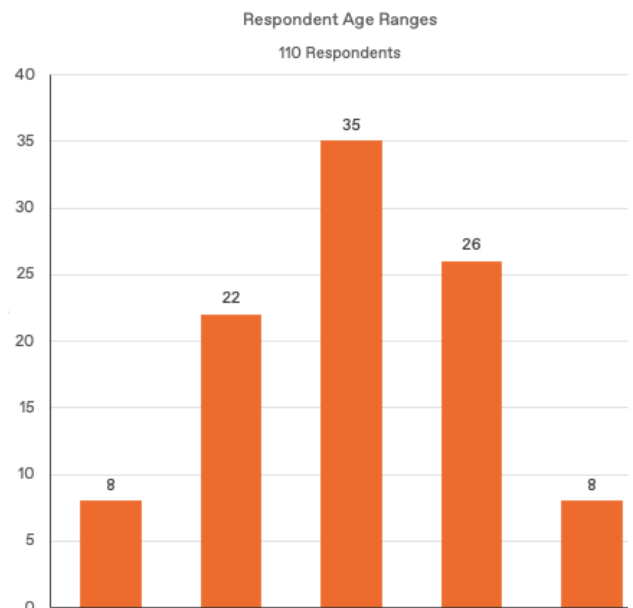
This summary shares our key conclusions.

Our full 'Lockdown Report' includes

- All questions as asked
- Aggregated pupil responses
- Full analysis
- Return to school recommendations for Educators, Policy Makers & Parents

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### Demographics



## Conclusions

Our Survey delivers specific insights into the mental and emotional responses of UK teenagers to Lockdown, the closure of schools and cancellation of National Exams, the transition to remote lessons and their views on their future, post-Lockdown.

Our analysis offers useful insights into how to best support and equip our teenagers for a return to full time, face-to-face schooling after an extended period of absence.

There is a clear opportunity for parents and teachers to normalise pupil reactions and to use this as a basis for self-reflection and positive learning, to embed resilience in order to better handle future stressors.

### Impact of Lockdown

Lockdown exposed all UK residents to both acute and chronic stressors over a number of months. In many ways, the experience of and our reactions to it mimicked the normal human response to imprisonment.

On March 19th, the future became uncertain as day-to-day life was placed in a state of confined limbo and routine freedoms were suspended. It is natural to struggle with a perceived losses of freedom, control, and choice and the stress caused.

### Loss

For pupils, the main stressors were a loss of

- Familiar day-to-day routine
- Connection with friends
- Sense of 'belonging' to school/community
- Perceived control over the future
- Influence over the final results of 'life-defining' National Exams.

Parents and carers were exposed to new stressors and responsibilities including loss of:

- Daily 'work' routine.
- Potential livelihood.
- Certainty over financial security.
- Familiar daily family dynamics
- Connection to remote, extended family.

Plus potential health risks associated with COVID.

Teachers and educators experienced the stressors listed above plus a profound shift in their daily work routines and responsibilities. This included, at very short notice;

- Online adaptation of teaching methods
- Delivery of lessons and digital learning
- Loss of holiday to bring lessons online.
- Managing spiralling pupil stressors and challenges remotely.
- Grading National Exams and force ranking their pupils.

Taken together, the impact of systemic stress , personal stressors and environmental stressors has been significant for everyone.

This offers clear opportunity for learning and finding new ways to better adapt to future stress.

Many pupils believe that they will come to terms with what has happened. As adults we can learn much about how to better respond to this kind of National crisis in future. There are clear lessons that we can learn around providing continuity of, and support for, UK education.

A relatively late 'crisis response' left no choice for pupils, parents and schools but to react on short timelines and with 'emergency measures'.

## Impact on Mental Health

The WHO officially announced that COVID-19 was a pandemic on March 11th. The UK Government responded by closing schools and cancelling National Exams.

### Acute Stressors

The announcement of school closures and exam cancellations caused acute stress.

This was due to the communication approach and lack of details. This had a negative impact on pupils, parents and teachers. Extreme stress was experienced by pupils in Years 11 and 13 pupils who were preparing for National Exams. Teaching staff also had to deliver the term's remaining lessons online, sacrifice their Easter break preparing to grade their pupils' National Exams and to deliver a Summer Term online.

### Government Announcements

Delivery, timing and content of announcements had a negative impact on pupils and teachers for the following reasons

- Brevity left unanswered questions
  - Schools were closed and exams cancelled in two sentences without comment or contingency plans in place.
- Truncated timeframes to re-organise
  - In 5 days pupils, parents and teachers had to adopt 'online schooling'.
  - Schools/Governing Bodies had 2 weeks advance warning of potential closures.
- Lack of guidance on grading led to rumours
  - Guidance on grading National Exams was not released for 2 weeks.
- In-built grading complexity created fear
  - Grades to be based on predicted and past performance and force-ranking.
  - Approach is semi-qualitative, partially subjective and decisions very possibly will be hard to defend.

The negative impact of the communication approach used by the UK Government surrounding education in the initial stages of Lockdown was reflected in pupil reactions.

There were strong immediate negative responses from pupils (82%) related to

- 80% wanting to sit their exams
- 82% struggled with school closure and exam cancellations
- 63% were unhappy with teachers grading National Exams
- 89% felt negatively or uncertain about how to respond to disappointing exam grades
- 41% of negative responses related to a loss of control and chance to perform in exams

### Chronic Stressors

#### Grief and Loss

After 6 weeks there was some 'emotional settling' amongst pupils, although 67% of pupil responses remained negative. By now many pupils were experiencing natural cycles of grief related to the loss of

- Perceived control over day-to-day routine
- The chance to influence exam grades (41%)
- Connection to friends (20%)
- The traditional end to the school year (17%)

#### Negative Resilience

74 % of pupils were not coping well with Lockdown after 6 weeks, with only 25% responding positively. We must be mindful and observant of pupils claiming to be 'doing great'. There is a real possibility that, for some, this may be a form of 'car crash' syndrome where those who are the most 'positive' and apparently calm in a crisis suffer from a deeper sense of trauma in the long term.

## Coping Strategies

In our work with schools we have identified four pupil archetypes that relate to response under stress based on different 'coping styles'.

In school, observable academic stress responses range from 'disengaged' to 'over-engaged'. While on the inside stress, pupil responses range from feelings of 'overwhelm' to 'overload'. Teenagers vary in their ability to cope with stress and their ability mask their responses. It is sometimes easy to spot those in trouble based on behaviour. This is not the case for all.

Of the four archetypes we observe, it is not only the most easily observed behaviours; withdrawal, disruption and disengagement or the more obviously 'disadvantaged' pupils who are at risk. The apparently more 'capable' and 'well-adjusted' pupils who appear to 'handle stress' well are often internally vulnerable and simply better at masking or holding stress in.

In this group, highly rational pupils are pre-disposed to internalise anxiety. They work hard to mask fears of failure, under-performance or feelings of 'not being good enough'. It is during the teenage years that 'imposter syndrome' is embedded – high performance at odds with a negative internal narrative and self-image.

'Good results' easily mask 'internal' struggles. We observe high-performing pupils (and their parents) tend to deny stress. Here, overworking and a performance focus acts as a cognitive distraction from psycho-emotional struggles. This group of individuals are prone to acute health issues in later life and can present with unexpected panic attacks around exams.

## Burn-out and breakdown.

'Overachievement' is just as debilitating as the overwhelm and disengagement seen in pupils at the other end of the 'performance spectrum'.

Pupils who struggle academically and/or are handling challenging life situations tend to attract school-initiated intervention and support. 'Overachievers' do not attract as much attention while they fight the stressful 'internal battles' masked by 'good grades'.

We observed the same pattern in Lockdown in both pupil and parent groups.

We all know that poor mental health does not discriminate based in socioeconomic status, background, upbringing, or academic intelligence. Exposure to the 'right cocktail' of stressors and circumstances can result in anyone being vulnerable to stress-related illness and compromised mental health.

There is a clear opportunity to use the return to school after Lockdown as an opportunity to level the mental health playing field and normalise stress independent of circumstance allowing all pupils to develop a healthier range of coping styles.

## Online Schooling

Another source of stress, particularly for Years 10 and 12 during Lockdown was the variable quality and quantity of online education and fears around a 'lost term' prior to the 2021 National Exam year.

Only 53% of the pupils surveyed were receiving lessons online.

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## Impact on Learning

### Online Schooling

Another source of stress, particularly for Years 10 and 12 during Lockdown was the variable quality and quantity of online education and fears around a 'lost term' prior to the 2021 National Exam year.

Only 53% of the pupils surveyed were receiving lessons online. 78% of pupils surveyed were undertaking self-directed learning and 24% were receiving additional support from third parties.

There was clear disparity in access and engagement. 66% of pupils indicated online schooling was not working for them. The main reason cited was 'too many distractions' (27%) with 29% citing a lack of teacher support or resources.

### Self-Directed Learning

It is clear that a proportion of pupils struggled to learn at home during Lockdown. This is not surprising. This was new, unfamiliar and there were 'teething problems' for both pupils and teaching staff.

It is clear that many pupils found it hard to adapt to lessons online (as did teachers). There are several reasons why this is likely to be the case including

- Lack of set-up and testing time
- Teacher experience and training
- Unfamiliar technology
- Lack of access to technology
- Short pupil transition to digital learning
- Non-adaptable lessons and content
- Unfamiliarity and time needed to adapt

It was also challenging for many teachers to 'teach from home' as they, like all adults were also juggling family life in the background. This poses a question around the effectiveness of undertaking homework in the same environment.

Some comfort can be drawn for the indication that 30% of pupils found online lessons as good as or better than lessons in school.

### Adaptive Learning

Ideally supporting pupils to adapt to different learning formats, especially using technology represents a valuable life skill for further education and longer term employment.

Overall this points to a clear opportunity to support pupils to

- Develop better self-directed learning skills.
- Use technology as a learning tool.
- Adapt to different forms of learning.

For many pupils, a focus on grades and academic outcomes appears to overweight getting 'results' vs building an ability to develop a robust approach to learning and to ask for more help under difficult circumstances. These are all valuable life skills.

### Levelling the Playing Field

There is a clear message that there is no perfect, 'one-size-fits' all approach to learning. Perhaps this points to the potential for the introduction of flexibility and an increased use of technology to support learning for all.



## Impact on Learning

### Impact on Learning

Many pupils shared that they had lost motivation, were not coping, and/or were feeling depressed in Lockdown. We believe that this has had a profound impact on learning.

We suggest that pupil mental health and experiences need to be formally addressed as part of the 'return to school' vs simply finding ways to help them 'catch up.'

## Life Beyond Lockdown

It is striking that only 55% of pupils shared positive feelings regarding life after Lockdown. The highest scoring category of feelings was negative reflecting anxiety and fear. This is normal, especially given the media reporting and the enormous disruption to every day life. It is sometimes difficult, we believe, to fully understand the extreme experience of teenagers in this situation. They are at an age where there is a natural drive towards friendships and finding their way in the outside world and away from 'family'. This has been disrupted. It has left many asking the question 'what next'.

This is also reflected in concerns shared around health, safety and social distancing. As new daily habits have taken hold.

Almost 60% shared that they 'couldn't wait' for Lockdown to be over and 75% felt positive about a return to school. Again this reinforces the crucial importance of peer contact at this age.

almost half indicated they needed a clear plan and support from teachers, 3rd parties, friends and family through the transition.

In summary, the COVID pandemic has had a profound impact on a whole generation of teenagers, their mental health, schooling, and view of today's world. We believe that parents, school communities, teachers and the pupils themselves have a vital role to play in reframing this challenge as learning.

There is a clear opportunity to 'future-proof' our education system using technology and proactively plan for other potential global shifts of this kind.

There are many positives to be drawn from this experience ranging from the incredible ability of people to adapt and work under stress in unfamiliar conditions to the willingness of our teaching profession, parents and pupils to experience online schooling en masse.

The full impact is yet to be fully felt. There are many lessons to be learned and in all of this a real duty of care for teenage mental health under extreme uncertainty.

Our full 'Lockdown Report' includes

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enabling anyone to excel through  
school, in work & life.

”

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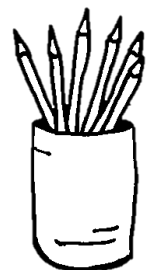
KCKD toolbox matched to the  
journey of the academic year for  
pupils & parents in major exam  
years & through life transitions -  
with optional group sessions.

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